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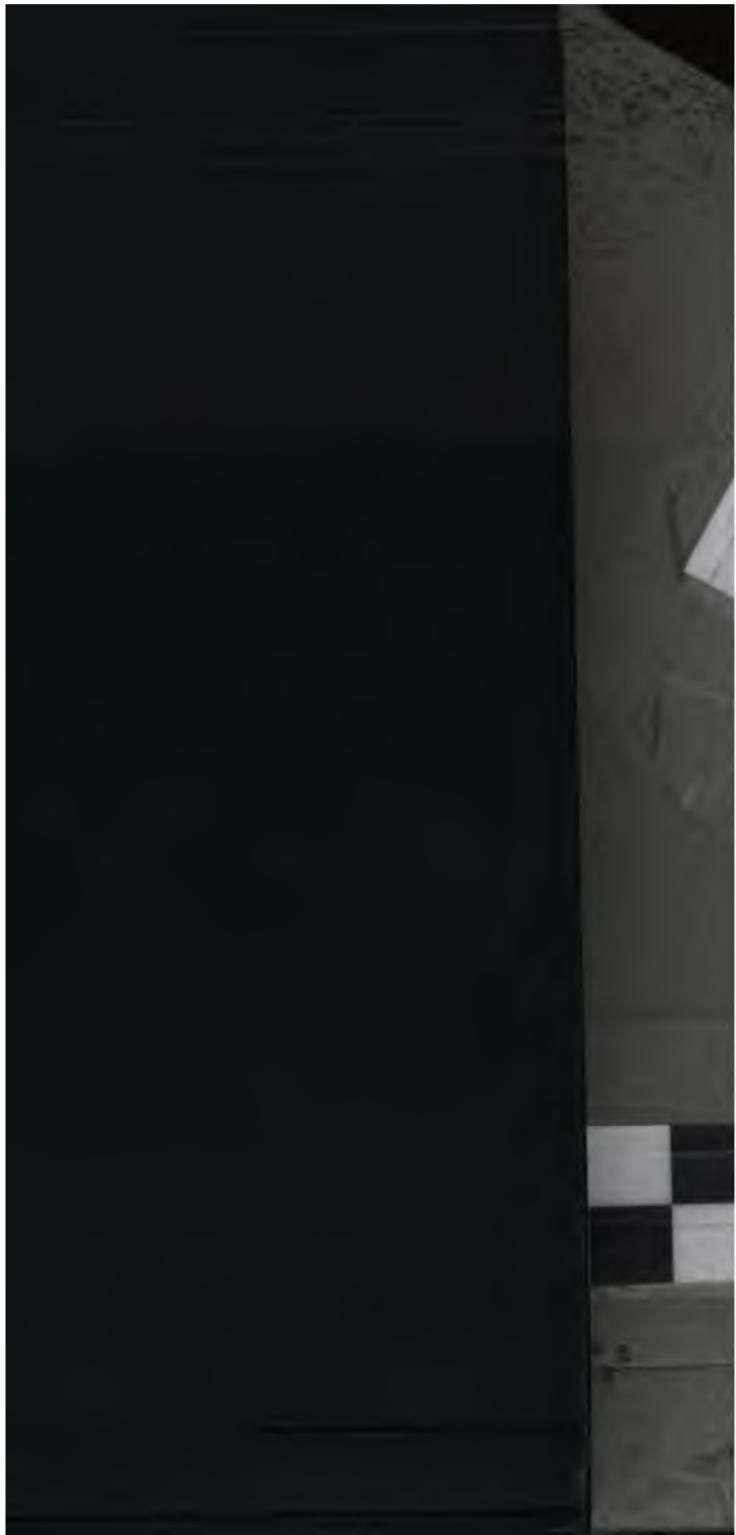
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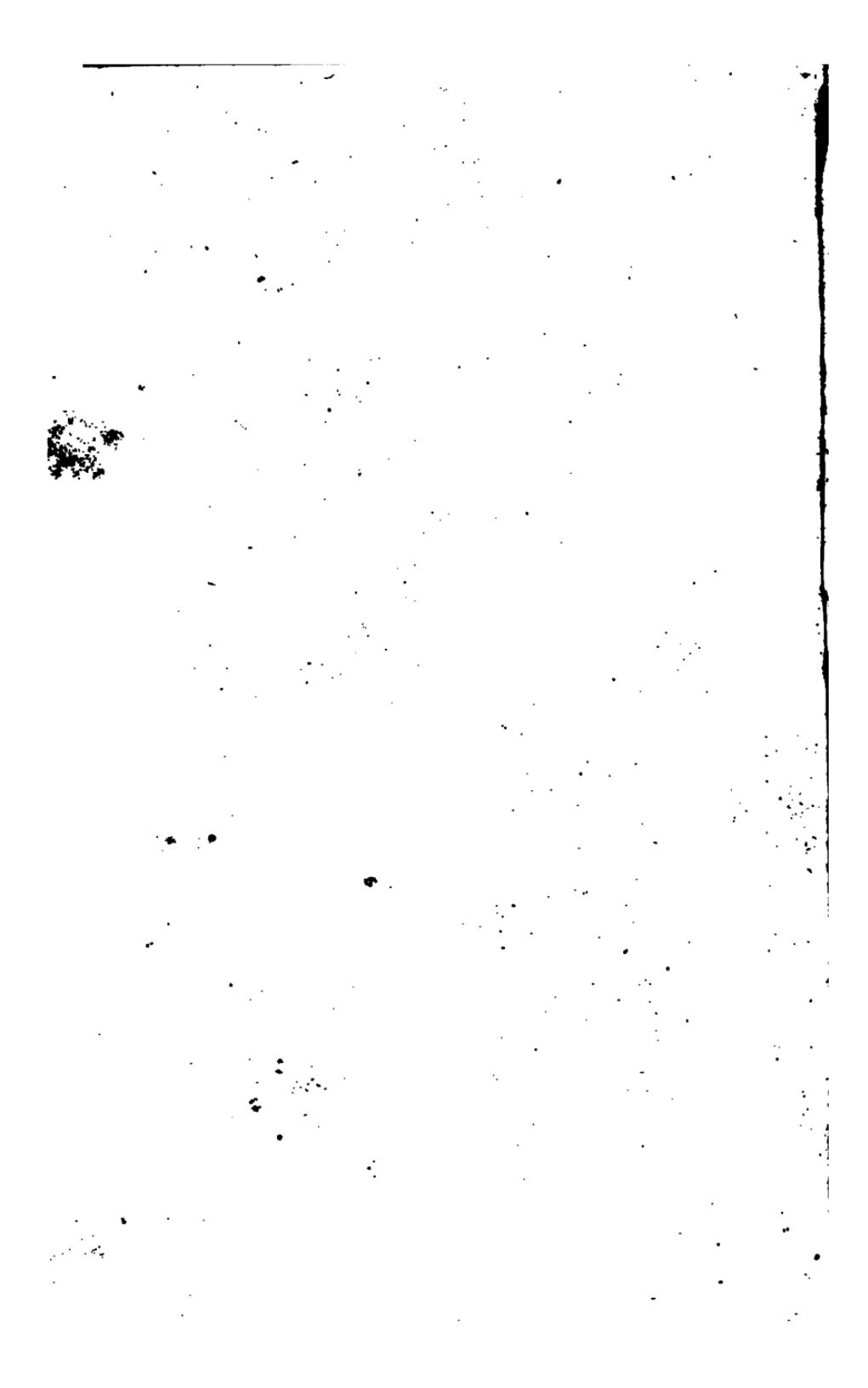
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Charles Gayley
From his Parents on
His Birthday
Feby 7 = 1901

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LONDON: JARROLD & SONS, 10 and 11, Warwick Lane.

BONNIE KATE.

A STORY.

FROM A WOMAN'S POINT OF VIEW.

BY

MRS. LEITH ADAMS

(MRS. R. S. DE COURCY LAFFAN),

*Author of "Aunt Hepsy's Foundling,"
"Louis Draycott," "Geoffrey Stirling," "My Land of Beulah,"
"Madelon Lemoine," "The Peyton Romance," etc.*

. "Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
Oh no ! it is an ever fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken,
It is the star to every wandering bark
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken."

Shakespeare's Sonnets, No. 166.

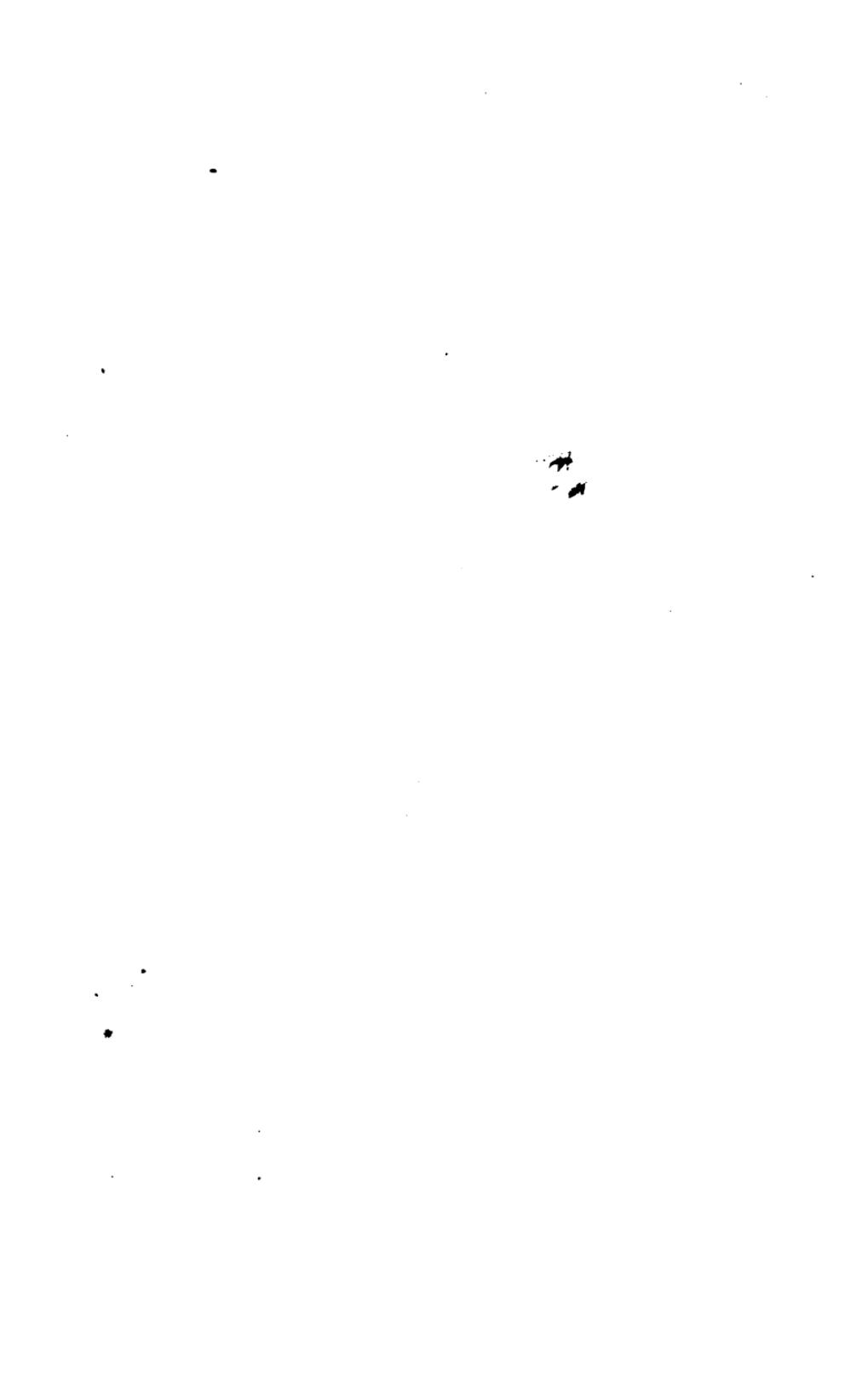
SECOND EDITION.

LONDON :

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1894.



Lovingly Dedicated
TO
FLORENCE SCOTT,
WHOSE AFFECTION AND FRIENDSHIP HAVE BEEN,
AND EVER WILL BE,
TO ME
A VERY SWEET AND PRECIOUS THING.

STRATFORD-ON-AVON,
1891.

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BONNIE KATE.

CHAPTER I.

A FAMILY PARTY.

CHLOE had eaten her own dinner and eaten the cat's dinner, and now, with the air of a starving mendicant, was soliciting contributions from the afternoon tea-table of the family to which she had the honour to belong.

Chloe was a pug of purest breed, with a nose like a button, and a beautiful black line running from her wrinkled forehead to her upcurled tail. She was of a delicate smoky fawn-colour, deep-chested, goggle-eyed, and greedy beyond all power of words to express.

She entertained a never-dying hatred of all other animals, apparently labouring under the belief that no other member of the brute creation, save herself, had a right to exist, and was supposed to look upon all the fields and all the meadows as things created solely to supply her with a few succulent blades of grass, when she should feel disposed to take a mild corrective.

On the present occasion Chloe's propensities came near to being her undoing, for, as she was swallowing a bit of bread-and-butter with a crusty angle, in the haste to be ready for

the next windfall, it stuck cross-wise in her throat, and she choked horribly.

"Really, Aunt Cynthia," said Willie Pierrepont, lifting his bright face from his paper, and looking indignantly at Chloe, now recovering from her convulsive efforts, "the greediness of that dog of yours is disgusting."

Aunt Cynthia, or, to give her her full title, Miss Cynthia Pierrepont, looked up calmly from her knitting. Aunt Cynthia did everything calmly; nothing ruffled her—least of all Chloe's choking over her food, an event that happened so often that anyone who had taken it to heart would have been worn out in less than a week.

"If Chloe's appetites are strong," said Aunt Cynthia, speaking in a low, soft, somewhat drawling voice, "so are her affections. I do not know a more loving dog."

Chloe, evidently taking in the drift of the conversation, looked as loving as possible, staggered painfully on her hind legs to the side of an elderly man who lay back in a lounge-chair within the arch of the wide bay-window, and shoved her black muzzle up against his arm. Her bulgy eyes, meanwhile, looked reproachfully across at Master Will, as who should say :

"Do I look like a dog who has no thought for anything save what she can get to put in her stomach? Aren't you ashamed of yourself to traduce me so? Did you ever see a more loving animal, or one of a more sensitive disposition?

As to Aunt Cynthia, her knitting still rested on the table, and from underneath the graceful sweep of her bands of snow-white hair her quiet, restful eyes gazed at Chloe as those of a fond mother might gaze at a cherished child.

"Sweet, little darling!" she murmured complacently, and then click, click! the busy pins were off again, and the white wool passed swiftly through fingers as white as itself.

Perhaps it was as well that the good lady's attention was too absorbed in the mysteries of knit two, carry one

and so on, to note the comical glance of Master Will's blue eyes, that looked for an answering smile from the worn, weary face of the sick man in the lounging-chair.

For sick he was—a stranger would have added, “nigh unto death”; but those who loved him—and who that knew him loved him not?—were, it may be mercifully, blinded to the fact that for Anthony Pierrepont, Major-General in Her Majesty's service, the last roll-call of all was about to sound.

The gaunt figure—soldierly still for all its stooping gait—the sunken eyes, the hollow temples, and the hurried breathing, all told the tale that loving eyes refused to read. When Aunt Cynthia said to people that her brother was going to travel “for his health,” to try the gentle air of Madeira “for a time,” when she said that the “doctors hoped so much from the climate,” and that in the spring there would be a happy home-coming, people hesitated a moment, almost gasped, and then, having got themselves well in hand, murmured politely how “nice” it was, and how “pleasant,” and how cheering it must be to have such an opinion “from one of the first men in London too.”

Behind the poor lady's back very different comments were uttered.

“God bless my soul!” cried an impatient old warrior, a one-time comrade of the General's; “can't the woman see the man's dying?”

“No, my dear,” replied his common-sense wife, “and a very good thing too. If she saw as we see, she would lose all heart.”

What of the sick man himself? Did he see as others saw, or with the gentle eyes of his sister Cynthia?

He saw the truth, and faced the enemy of the nations as he had faced the Sepoy bayonets and the Russian guns in a day that was long past, fearlessly, without heat, and without tremor.

He did not strive to tear off the bandage that love had bound over the eyes of those who loved and tended him ; he did not grudge them the hope that was but a fair delusion. He knew all the truth and kept silence, rejoicing exceedingly in the love they bore him, thinking of and for each one of them, and smiling a sudden, sweet, far-off smile when they spoke of the time when he should be "quite well and strong again," and all the old home-life should enter upon a new lease of existence. For they were bound upon a long journey, this family circle to whom the reader is but just introduced, going on that saddest quest, the search after health in a distant land.

They were an oddly related family, these Pierreponts of Ellersleigh ; a "scrappy" family in their relations to each other, as the sharp young lady of the neighbourhood cleverly put it.

Brother and sister, the son of a younger brother, the daughter of a younger sister, both by a strange stroke of fate orphaned when too young to know the meaning of the word—these, with Chloe as a fifth, formed the family party at Ellersleigh ; scrappy, if you will, but happy as it is given to few households, however closely linked, to be.

In three weeks' time three of the community were to start for the Island of Flowers, and the fair riverside home was to be left to solitude, servants, and—Chloe.

This last point had not been carried without some disputation, for Aunt Cynthia deprived of her pet companion was ever conscious of a blank in life ; but William Dennis Pierrepont, the bright-eyed young fellow of twenty, who could "coax the heart out of a stone," as Mrs. Dulcimer, the housekeeper, was wont to put it, had succeeded in persuading Chloe's mistress that Chloe should remain behind and guard the house from possible burglars.

"The little animal is so intelligent, you see, Aunt Cynthia," said Will, with the smile of a diplomatist ; "she

will understand the situation at once, and sleep with one eye open, and her tail curled ready for battle."

Aunt Cynthia looked over her spectacles at Chloe, with wheezy breath and uncurled tail, sleeping off her last heavy meal in preparation for another, and yielded.

"Ah, but it's Master William has the tongue of the serpent and the wisdom of the dove!" said Mrs. Dulcimer subsequently, meaning to flatter her young master, yet hardly hitting the right nail on the head. So it was settled that Chloe was not to go to Madeira.

That left a party of three; Aunt Cynthia, Will, and—though last, not least, since the journey was to be undertaken on his account alone—the General.

Does the beauty of the world appeal with a special power and pathos to those who are conscious that their eyes must soon close upon it for ever?

One would have thought so, to see the grave sweetness with which Anthony Pierpoint was watching the gleam of the sunshine on river and tree, and the gentle swaying of branches, that were ruddy or golden just here and there near the tips, as though a painter had touched them with a brush fresh from "putting in" a sunset.

There lay the stretch of green sward sloping down to the river Thames, that twinkled through the boles of the trees upon its banks. Their branches, touching the ripples with shadow-fingers as they passed, swayed gently in the sunshine; and, below, the boat that had been Will's birthday gift from Aunt Cynthia bobbed lazily up and down like a duck asleep upon the water.

Against the glow of the evening sky swallows floated, dipped, and twirled, shrieking in shrill concert as they fell. The time was come when, gathered in fluttering, restless groups, they would answer to the summons of the sun, and follow him to warmer climes. With spring they would return, chatter beneath the eaves, and fill the air with their shrill and plaintive cries.

But might not one traveller follow the sunshine, and return no more when the summer came again?

"Where is Kate?" said the General, turning from the window that framed so fair a landscape, and looking to his sister Cynthia for an answer.

But Will's ready tongue made reply:

"Upstairs, I expect, in her 'den,' poring over Byles and Blackstone, qualifying to be the wife of a Q.C. that is to be."

"Striving to fit herself to be her husband's companion in all things; to enter into his life and work. A noble ideal—a noble ideal!" said the General, lifting and dropping the hand that lay upon the arm of his chair to emphasize his words.

"All Kate's ideals are noble ones," said Will, with a flash in his eyes. "John Granger is a lucky fellow."

"And I'm sure no one can rejoice with him more heartily than I do," said Aunt Cynthia, putting down her knitting, and taking out her pocket-handkerchief. "But still I must say I can't imagine what this place would be like without her—when we come back I mean. You, Anthony, will miss her most of all. She has hardly been an hour away from your side—has she?—ever since you gave up going to the club, and took to staying at home so much? And I will say that, for reading aloud, she has the pleasantest voice. While you and she have been going through Mr. Browning's poems, brother, it has often soothed me into quite a doze. I do assure you it has."

"We need no assuring on that point: we are quite convinced, dear Cynthia;" said the General, with a gentle irony all unrecognised by the good lady to whom it was addressed.

"It sounds so strange, brother," said Miss Cynthia, with an aggrieved air, "to hear you talk of Kate—our own Kate—being married."

"Well, my dear, you see—" began the General.

But the dear lady would not argue.

"I know—I know," she said. "You are quite right ; you always are, Anthony ; but yet it seems to set it out all so plainly, as it were, to make it so real, and I'm sure I cannot bear to think what will be the blank to all of us, and to you more especially, brother—I mean her being gone when we are settled down at home again after our wanderings. It will be like being without sunshine, and you will miss her most of all. I must try and take her place as reader to you, dear, but I am not a good reader. I am always ready to acknowledge that. I lose my place in the line, and have to go back two or three words to find it again, and that you know, destroys the flow—especially of poetry. But I can try, dear, and you will be very patient with me, I know."

There was a tender light in General Pierrepont's bright, sunken eyes, and in his smile as he turned to her ; but Will's face was grave as he heard Aunt Cynthia speak of the homecoming that to her simple mind seemed so sure a thing. The boy had a clearer intuition than the rest as to how things were with Uncle Anthony.

"Dear, dear ! how you are coughing," said Miss Cynthia, as the sick man's gaunt frame was shaken as a blighted tree by the storm ; "that comes of a chillness in the air to-day. I have been sensible of it myself ; indeed, I sneezed twice before lunch. You must have taken a little extra cold, Anthony."

Chloe, whose affections were assuredly, as Miss Cynthia said, on a par with her appetite, seeing that something was wrong, stood on end to lick the worn hand that now hung down in all the helplessness of exhaustion, and on which the knuckles stood out significantly prominent, while Miss Cynthia looked at Will, as who should say : "I defy anyone to say it is anything more than a little extra cold."

Oh, the wilful blindness of love, the tender obstinacy that will not see ! What sight, in all this world of ours, is more piteous or more beautiful ?

A reluctance to speak of his own ailments or sufferings was always noticeable in Anthony Pierrepont. It was as though, seeing his sister's determined blindness to the inevitable, he was set upon helping her to shroud her eyes from the things that frightened her gentle soul to look upon.

He fondled Chloe's ball of a head, as it bobbed up and down at his side with restless persistency, and with a determined effort to recover breath went back to the subject of Kate.

"She was always terribly in earnest even from a little lass, was Kate—Bonnie Kate. Do you remember, Cynthia, when she was a wee, toddling thing, how she cried because Mason the gardener had pulled the hats off the eschscholtzia blossoms, and she fancied the gnomes would be sad when they came to look for their little brown-peaked caps and could not find them?"

"That I do," said Aunt Cynthia; "and how she called out that the tall kitchen clock was dead, and couldn't speak any more, and then, when we went to look, you had forgotten to wind it up, brother. I must say," continued Aunt Cynthia, looking hesitatingly round at Will, "that your dear uncle very seldom forgets anything, but on that one occasion—one very rare occasion—he did forget, and the dear child was the first to discover—Dear, dear!" said Aunt Cynthia, again looking helplessly round, "how strange it seems to think of Kate—our own Kate—being married only five days from now!"

"Beginning life in earnest," put in Will—"really in earnest!"

"Kate has always been in earnest," said the General. "She has become a woman now, and put away childish things; but the same tune rings on through all the years, the same intensity colours all she says and does. She will always take life hard, will Kate—always suffer more keenly than others. She does not believe now in the gnomes and their little brown caps, nor look upon the tall clock as a

living thing ; but it will be the same with her in the greater as in the lesser things of life ; intensify—intensify—intensify—that is what she will always do. John Granger has undertaken a great responsibility, for Kate will be hard to live up to—hard to guard from her own nature.”

Aunt Cynthia looked sorely troubled, and not a little puzzled.

“I do not know, brother, what has come over you. I don’t—I really don’t think you can be as well as usual this evening ; perhaps a mist is rising from the river.”

“There is no mist before my eyes,” said the General, a solemn look upon his worn and noble face. “I see clearly enough. I look on into the future, and I see my darling’s path begirt with trials and difficulties, yet I am not afraid for her. I know she will never lose sight of the light that shineth from above ; I know in whom she hath believed ; I know that if she hath been dowered with a perilous nature, yet shall God guide and guard her, as He guides and guards us all if we trust Him.”

Will’s face was hidden by his hand ; you could see the beautifully cut mouth, with its golden shade upon the upper lip, tremble like a woman’s.

As for Aunt Cynthia, she gave up trying to understand anything. Anthony was rather “low” to-day, and must be humoured. It almost seemed as though he were speaking unkindly of Kate—but that could not be ; that must be just a foolish old woman’s fancy. Anthony was so clever ; it was not to be expected that one could always follow his train of thought. Only a very clever man like himself could be expected to do that. The one thing sure was that he must be humoured. He must be roused from his low fit. It was foolish of Will to sit there with his hand over his face as if he were crying. That only made matters worse, and they were bad enough already : indeed, she (Miss Cynthia) would have to mention the strange way in which the General had been talking (she only hoped it was not wandering) to Dr. Adamson the very next morning.

Meanwhile, she—Cynthia Pierrepont—felt called upon to make an effort—to rise to the occasion, as it were, and set a good example to Will.

She let Chloe drop from her knee with scant ceremony, to the unbounded amazement of that favourite of fortune, drew her white shawl gracefully about her shoulders, and, crossing the room with the languid grace for which she had been celebrated from a girl, seated herself at the piano, and struck a few harmonised chords.

The General's hand began to rise and fall on the arm of his chair, to the rhythm of the music, at which Miss Cynthia nodded, well pleased; and, proud of the success of her subtle doings, she began to sing in a clear sweet voice, worn as was natural, yet not without a plaintive melodiousness of its own.

Her song, like her voice, was of an old fashion, yet had in it the sweetness of dry rose-leaves and lavender.

“Knell of departed years,
Thy voice is sweet to me,
It wakes no sad foreboding fears,
Calls forth no sympathetic tears,
Time's restless course to see;
From hallowed ground
I hear the sound
Diffusing through the air a holy calm around.

“Thou art the voice of Love,
To obide each doubt away,
And as the murmur faintly dies,
Visions of past enjoyments rise
In long and bright array:
I hail the sign
That love divine
Will o'er my future path in cloudless mercy shine.

“Thou art the voice of hope,
The music of the spheres,
A song of blessings yet to come,
A herald from my future home. . . .”

And then she opened the door and came in amongst them, a bright and beautiful presence, Bonnie Kate—my Kate—the heroine of this my story.

“Are you singing good wishes for me, dear Aunt Cynthia?” she said, passing her arm about the white-shawled shoulders, and kissing the soft old cheek of the singer. “How I love all your old songs, even, ‘A little cock sparrow he sat on a tree,’ that you used to sing to me ‘between the lights’ when I was a wee thing; and how I shall think of them all when I—when you —”

In a moment, with a soft rush, she had flung herself on her knees beside her uncle, and was clinging about him with fond arms.

“Oh,” she said, “how good you have all been to me! How good! How good!”

And the tears fell from her bright eyes like rain.

Chloe abased herself in a corner of Miss Cynthia’s gown, conscious that some family crisis had arrived, and knowing no better way of displaying her sympathy. Miss Cynthia’s song had been cut in two, and nothing could piece it again, to say nothing of the singer’s voice being choked in tears; while Will bent anxiously over the General, fearful of what the effect of such agitation might be.

But over the sick man seemed a strange calmness; he folded Kate close in his arms, and kissed the sweet brow with its frame of sunny ripples—kissed it long and tenderly.

“My darling,” he said, “if all our good wishes for you come true, there will not be a happier woman in England than John Granger’s wife—our own Bonnie Kate.”

And Chloe, seeing a smile here and there, took heart of grace, and clambered up on to the General’s knee.

“Chloe! Chloe!” cried Kate, clasping the little dog close, and kissing the round, black, wrinkled head. “I shall think of you too, never fear, many a time and oft.”

“It is not likely that any one who had ever known Chloe would forget her,” said Miss Cynthia, with calm assurance.

CHAPTER II.

ACROSS THE THRESHOLD.

AUTUMN had begun to touch the world with light and tender hand, putting in here and there a mellow shade so ripe and beautiful that it seemed rather the sign-manual of richness and completeness than the first herald of death and decay. The country, spreading out like a panorama on this side and on that, held a sunshine of its own, so brightly showed these vivid patches of colour—a sunshine that no cloud could obscure or take away. Here was a branch russet-red, there a rose-briar in the hedge a streak of glowing crimson, now a bough just tipped with yellow-ochre, now a whole brake aflame with shades of amber and ruby.

Faint lines of pale orange-pink showed across the western horizon, and through these dainty bars the sinking sun looked forth upon the fair bejewelled world. A river lay dark and still in the near foreground, each separate pollard upon its banks, with its clear reflection sleeping at its feet, a perfect duplicate. Then came a pool, flag-fringed, set in the bosom of a meadow, its quiet water all rosy with the reflected light from above ; upon its margin a slender, solitary tree, that bent lovingly above it as one loving might watch the loved one sleeping. A windmill, with its long arms slowly whirling, swept the grass with infinite shadows, its head set in a fire, as the sunset glowed behind it. Then came long, seemingly interminable seas of soft green uplands, rolling on and on like billows of verdure, fold on fold, their rounded crests gleaming emerald-like in the level sun-rays, their wide

expanse broken here and there by groups of larch or dark belts of fir ; but yet their continuity unbroken for mile after mile, and stretch upon stretch.

All these fair and varied aspects of Nature, all these swiftly-changing landscapes had been watched by sweet, observant eyes as the train for the north sped on its way, for Bonnie Kate was on her travels now, with a plain gold ring on the third finger of her soft white hand, and seated opposite to her was her husband, John Granger, barrister-at law, the man for whom she had groped among the lore of Byles and Blackstone, and for whose dear sake she had even "forsaken all others," and vowed to "keep only to him so long as they both should live."

Kate had a rapt, serious look, and in her eyes was the shining of a new joy, still so new as to hold some troubled sweetness in its depths. It seemed to her as if into the last fortnight of her life had been compressed more than all the experiences that lay in all the years behind—more joy, more longing, more sadness too ; for did not the pain of parting from Uncle Anthony, Aunt Cynthia, and Will hang over the content of that fair marriage-day that had made her John's dear wife for good and all ?

The memories of last looks, last words, lingering touches even of Chloe's wriggling herself in among the guests at the wedding-breakfast and curling herself up under the table in the folds of Kate's cream-satin skirts, by no means to the advantage of the same ; the memory of Will's dear, bright face, all blurred with fond, unwilling tears, which he strove to hide by holding hard on to Grippe, the wire-haired terrier, who lived in the yard because he was "unkind" to Chloe—Grippe, a born hunter, and for ever in trouble over chickens, or young ducks, or such small deer, and somehow a guest among the rest on the occasion of the "going away," barking madly at the bridegroom, whom some subtle instinct taught him to recognise as a thief. Kate always had a kind word for Grippe, choking at the end of his chain in his

anxiety to accompany anyone or no one upon a ramble in the woods, or by the river, where sleek water-rats were to be found. And may-be the rough-bearded creature knew he was being defrauded of a friend.

How she and John had talked over every detail of that all-important day, and yet how fresh it all seemed as her memory dwelt upon it even now! In looking back upon that dear home life so lately parted with, how vivid was each spot of colouring in the picture fondly dwelt upon! The bright river, seen through the vista of the trees; the boat, with its nose among the flags and the buttercups; the General's tall figure, still held so upright by sheer force of will, and in spite of weakness and pain, pacing up and down the velvet lawn, with Aunt Cynthia chattering by his side; and Chloe stealing stealthily into the side bushes, with the unsuspecting lady's ball of white knitting-wool held in her distended jaws. These, and such slight fancies, would come before her mind's eye, seeming so real, and yet so far away as to prove what a shadowy thing is time, after all.

Most solemn of all these memories was that of the General's adieu to the girl who had been to him as the very apple of his eye. Had not Kate, clinging to his breast—the breast that had ever been her shelter—looked up through blinding tears to the face that bent above her, and seen the eyes raised to heaven, the pallid lips moving, and caught the words: “Into Thy hands I commend her. Guide her, teach her, comfort her—oh, my God!” Had not that murmured prayer been to her as a benediction—a solemn commendation? When Aunt Cynthia came hurriedly along, out of herself, as it were, with excitement and much weeping, and cried: “Oh, my dear General, they will miss the train—they will, indeed!” the interruption had been as a hand that suddenly rent some beautiful thing asunder. There was a sudden closer pressure of the arms that held her, and then she was among the eagerly waiting throng; and in another moment she was seated in the carriage beside her husband,

not, however, before she had given one long look back, and seen the tall form towering above the others—seen the hand raised in a supreme gesture of farewell. It was hard—hard to leave them all, and yet not too hard a thing to do for John's sake.

Could anything be too hard for that? Well, time and life would show. Certainly, as she sped along northward, across the soft, undulating plains of green sward that lie beyond the fair city of York, Kate would have told you that no trial could be too great for the “love that loves alway”—the love that filled her heart and life even to overflowing.

The happy “half of a honeymoon”—for Mr. Granger could only take a short holiday from work even on such an important occasion as his marriage—had passed like a summer's day, spent, as it was, in the island that inspired Keats to write that immortal line, “A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.” And, truly, that quiet time of mutual companionship and love would always be a precious memory—a garnered “joy for ever” to Kate. As she had learnt more and more of her husband's thoughts and ambitions, the greater, so she imagined, grew her precious store of knowledge how to adapt herself to him; how best to become all that the one word “helpmeet” meant in her devoted creed. For the love in this girl-wife's heart was of the kind that pervades the whole life, and fills the world of the mind with the one beloved. It may be questioned, indeed, if Kate had ever asked herself: “Will John Granger make me a happy woman?” Rather had she asked herself with passionate insistence: “Shall I make John a happy man?”

I am aware that love of this peculiar nature is rare, but it is possible, and is, of all other, the love that suffers most—that must suffer from its very essence. I am also aware that it may be somewhat out of rule to begin the story of a woman's life after her wedding-day, yet methinks the deepest, truest life-dramas are played after, and not before, the magic ring is on, and the heart has donned its willing fetters.

"These long stretches of green are the Wolds you have often told me of, are they not, John?" said Kate, and John Granger, who was looking over a bundle of papers, looked up to meet his wife's sunny, smiling eyes.

Let us sketch him. It is a good opportunity with the mellow sunlight falling full upon his handsome face. Very handsome had women thought that face, some one or more to their own undoing, for John had never been an impressionable man, and was ever slow to realise that a woman's fancy may outstrip reality and bask in the sunshine of a fool's paradise. I do not say the man had not had his fancies, even his loves. The young barrister had a broad, square brow, lambent eyes, and hair short and dark, crisply curled, too nice altogether to be gradually thinned by the wearing of the official wig. The lower part of his face was concealed by a pointed beard bronze in tint and growing picturesquely. Doubtless had John Granger been clean-shaved the general impression his appearance conveyed would have been a different one. One would have recognised the fact that here was a man of great sensitiveness, much tenderness, but with a strain of weakness marring an otherwise fine character. As it was, the whole effect was charming. The square shoulders, the lithe manly figure carried well the finely-balanced head; the well-cut profile made a side view of the man pleasant; and something pathetic in the curve of the brows, and the clear, shining eyes, awoke a strong interest even at first sight; as indeed had been the case with Bonnie Kate.

By a quaint mistake she had, on the occasion of their first meeting, supposed Mr. Granger to be a married man. He had talked to her and she to him, and the thought had crossed her mind that the woman who owned him was one of the lucky ones of the earth. She did not exactly wish, perhaps, that "heaven had made her (Katherine Ward Sinclair) such a man," but doubtless the half-formed idea lurked somewhere; at all events, it quickly enough took form and

semblance when, on further acquaintance, the young barrister—John was thirty—but at that age a man is supposed to be a very baby of a barrister—proved to be free and unfettered, and sought her society on every possible and impossible occasion. It was a clear case of love at first sight, this romance of John Granger's, nor was he by any means a placid and easily contented lover. He had no fancy to do without Kate a day longer than he could help, and twisted Aunt Cynthia round his little finger as easily as though she had been a skein of her own knitting-wool.

So the wedding came off, as we have seen, before the General and his party set off to Madeira on that weary quest called "the pursuit of health." (Alas! how often a quarry that is never overtaken!)

The happy bride and bridegroom had spent a happy *solitude à deux* in lovely Shanklin, and now, in acquiescence with a very strongly expressed wish on the part of John's "people," were journeying northwards, across that green undulating sea, the Wolds of Yorkshire.

Just at first the idea of their journey had been unpleasing to Kate. She clung to that absolute and entire possession of her husband that had made life a new thing for her. She longed to pursue at her own sweet and uninterrupted will the lesson that was to be her guide in the future: to acquire that close knowledge of his mind and heart that was to enable her to make his life a perfect dream of content, when the time came that they two should mingle in the world again.

Yet there was a great joy underlying the thought of the change too. She should see the house that had been John's from boyhood; she should see and learn to love his "people." I doubt much if a man ever fully understands this particular phase of a woman's love, the divine curiosity that will saturate her heart through and through to know those who have loved him, and whom he had loved, before she herself ever knew him.

I say "divine curiosity," because it is a feeling far remote from the spirit of prying. It holds a sacred longing to know somewhat of those years that lie behind the happy chance that brought him across her own pathway ; the years in which he lived, and loved, perchance suffered too, and she knew it not. For a deep, true, passionate love has hands to stretch backwards as well as forwards ; backwards to lay trembling, eager fingers on the child, the boy, the man that are all one—the one, the only one to her ; and forwards in a tender yearning to shield, to comfort, to "have and to hold," in all the "changes and chances of this mortal life," that the future, so dim and uncertain, may yet bring.

"These are the Yorkshire Wolds, then," said Kate again, not in the least resenting, as a lesser woman might have done, the slight pre-occupation in John's face as he looked up from the business papers on his knee—papers that had been sent after him by his clerk, and meant work, and plenty of it, when he should get back to London, and to that snug little home in West Kensington that was all ready prepared for the coming of its dainty mistress.

"Yes, those are the Wolds ; and I never saw them looking fairer. They have put on their best dress to welcome you, Kate."

"How the very sight of them makes one think of the Brontës ! I expect Charlotte walked about them when she was thinking out 'Jane Eyre,' and poor Emily watched them when the storm was driving across them, and so was driven to write 'Wuthering Heights.' I always fancy she must have *had* to write that book ; that it must have gone on acting and acting itself over and over again in her mind, until it was a relief to write it all down on paper."

"The Wolds near which the Brontës lived are wilder and less green than these," said John. "I will take you there some day."

This last sentence was spoken with the smiling, radiant glance that told her how sweet it was to him to say :

"I will take you here, there, where I will. You are mine to take anywhere."

Kate's face said plainly enough in answer :

"Whither thou goest I will go." And in her heart she finished the quotation : "Thy people shall be my people."

She drew a letter from her dainty little handbag.

"It is Aunt Libbie—is it not?—who writes to you? That is short for Elizabeth, I suppose. Those quaint home-names are in some families, I know. I remember the Anstruthers had always a Dorothy, called Dolly. 'Lady Dolly' was quite an institution among them. I daresay there has always been a 'Libbie' amongst you, generation after generation." Then, still poring over the pages of Aunt Libbie's letter : "This one is a bit of a character, isn't she, John? 'I hope you won't cross Brother, in the matter of this home-coming. When he sets his mind on a thing, he's apt to get a bit t-e-t-c-h-e-y' (What a droll word!), 'and he's set on seeing this London lady of yours, and showing her off at church and market.'"

Kate's merry, silvery laugh rang out.

"Oh, John," she said, "Aunt Libbie is by way of being a droll. I long to see her. So I'm a 'London lady,' am I? Well, Richmond—dear old Richmond!—is London in a way, and I suppose 'church and market' stand for some family joke that I am not yet up in."

John, who was busy with the window-strap, that had got entangled somehow, made no direct reply, and Kate, looking dreamily at the passing landscape, let her thoughts fly to the dear riverside home once more. She saw it all—the long, sloping garden, the glinting river seen through the trees, and the splash of the oars as Will brought the boat up to the bank.

Strange things these "mind photographs;" more intensely real and accurate in every detail than the best camera can produce.

Kate could almost hear the rippling gurgle of the water

among the flags and the loose-strife, as she thought of the old home that had already taken up its place in the background of her life, so vivid was the foreground that had dwarfed, but never could hide it. John was the next to break the silence, and there was a shadow of some troubled thought upon his brow as he spoke :

"I should never had brought you north at all, Kate; if you hadn't been so furiously set upon it yourself."

She moved across to his side.

"Was it so very unnatural I should be set upon it, dear ? You are so much, so dear to me, that everything about you, anyone belonging to you, must be dear to me too. I want to be able to piece together something of the long, empty years when I did not know you, and I have not learnt much of them yet, you must remember—certainly not by letter, for this dear, droll Aunt Libbie is the only one who has ever written at all. I have sometimes fancied—oh, John—that they may have thought our marriage too rash, too sudden ?"

"My darling !" he said, tenderly, as he kissed the tears from the sweet, troubled eyes raised in pretty deprecation to his, "as if I were likely to be a day without you that I could help."

"Yes, I know," she answered, still with a sob in her throat. "And when we had only known each other a week it seemed as though we had known each other for years and years. One was quite deceived as it were—was not one ?"

"Quite. I have often wondered how I ever got through the days before I knew there was such a person as Bonnie Kate in the world."

"You like Uncle Anthony's name for me, then ?"

"I think it suits you down to the ground. You will always be Bonnie Kate to me. I shall never forget the first time I heard the General call you so."

"Dear Uncle Anthony," said Kate, the ready tears starting again. "How beautiful it will be to have him home again

quite well and strong, just like he used to be! What happy days we shall have going up to Richmond! Aunt Cynthia said . . . John, you are not listening to me."

For John was staring out of the window, intently watching the sunset that grew ever more and more gorgeous and rich tinted.

"Yes, I am, dear," he answered, turning towards her; "yes, I am."

"Well, don't speak as if you were sorry for sumfin', as Walt Whitman says Robin sings. I am talking of happy things, you know, not sad ones. You heard what Lady Darrell said to me the other day? You must have done, for you were standing close, I remember. I mean about her brother-in-law. He was ever so much more ill than Uncle Anthony, and he went to Madeira, just as uncle is doing, and came back quite well. People could hardly believe he had ever been ill at all. Nothing could be more encouraging for us, could it?"

"Nothing."

Still John spoke without looking at her; but she did not notice it this time, being too much carried away by her own earnestness.

"Lady Darrell said the change of climate acted 'like magic,' and what happened in the case of one person is most likely to happen in the case of another person, is it not?"

"Assuredly."

"John, you are what Mrs. Dulcimer calls rather short this afternoon; you answer in monosyllables, lazy boy that you are! You must have caught it from Will. He answered Lady Darrell just in the same way—as if he didn't care a bit about what she was saying—he, who can be such a chatterbox when he likes."

"My dear," said John, "I always care to listen to what you say. You could never say anything I should not care to listen to."

"Don't be rash," laughed Kate, with a charming air of coquetry. "These are early days."

"I am not afraid," he said, confidently.

"Well, then, listen to me now. Tell me more of these people whom I shall see so soon, for we are not far from our journey's end, are we, John?"

"Not very," he answered, taking a long, deep breath as he spoke; "but I am willing to make good use of the time, and tell you all I can. Not that there is much more to say than I have said a dozen times already. They are plain and simple people; they will make you very welcome in their own way——"

"But tell me what they are like. Is Aunt Libbie (how pat I have her name!) anything like Aunt Cynthia—to look at, I mean?"

"Not in the least."

"Could you describe her?"

"It would be difficult, Kate. I am not a good limner in words."

"She is eccentric?"

"Yes, but her heart is more tender than either her looks or her manner. She has been the head of the house ever since my poor mother——"

"I know. I can see it all. When your mother's health gave way, this Aunt Libbie did her best to fill her place—to all of you. I love her already—not, of course, as I shall love your mother. I have never known a mother of my own, and all the love is ready for yours, John. I shall spend hours in that quiet room of hers that you have told me of. I can fancy it with soft white curtains, and flowers daintily arranged—fresh every day—with the scent of lavender everywhere, and a white, patient face with your eyes, John (I am sure she has just such dark-grey limpid eyes, dear), on the pillow. Then your father—I have fancied him too—tall and white-haired, with a look of you in the shape of the head. And the girls—twins, are they not! Leah and

Rachel, such quaint, old-world names ! By the way, have they been presented yet ? ”

“ No.”

“ Well, I can present them, you know. John,” this after a little pause, “ I wish you had seen me in my court-dress ; it was the prettiest thing——”

“ So were you, I doubt not.”

“ Uncle Anthony thought so. I hardly cared what anybody else thought.”

“ I can believe that ; you are not at all a vain woman, Kate.”

“ Oh yes, I am, desperately, in my own way. If I love a person, I like them to think me entirely charming. It is because I am going to love all these people of yours very dearly that I want to look my best while I am with them, and have brought my prettiest dresses. What a pity it was your sisters could not come to our wedding ! How disappointed I was when you told me about it ! If they had come I should have known them, you see, and not have felt so strange at Low Cross.”

“ They lead such a quiet life——”

“ On account of your mother. O yes, I understand that, and your father never leaves home for the same reason. I suppose,” with a roguish smile, “ you would not have liked Aunt Libbie to have come ? ”

“ Good heavens—no ! ” said John, with a great start—with a shudder too, though Kate did not know it.

“ She would have worn some eccentric costume ? ”

“ There can be no doubt of that.”

“ Said out-of-the-way things ? ”

“ Very much so.”

“ O dear, what a great deal we have missed ! ”

“ We have indeed.”

“ Well, now, tell me about your brother. He is younger than anyone ? ”

“ A great deal younger, and——”

"Yes, I know," put in Kate, hurriedly ; "he is different to other people."

Her hand stole into her husband's. She drew closer to his side.

"That just describes it, Kate. No one would call Humbie a cripple, but yet he is not like other people. Kate, my dear, I hope you will care for my brother. In years he is but sixteen, but in thought, and heart, and mind he is older than any of us. I don't know what mother would do without Humbie."

"I shall love him so that you will be quite jealous ; see if I don't. I love him already from what you have told me of him. His full name is Humboldt, is it not ? Is that another family name ?"

"No ; but it suits the boy, it seems made for him. He is just Humbie ; he could be nothing else."

The green undulating meadowlands were passed ; rugged rocks showed here and there ; steep hillsides sheltered villages, each like a group of chickens gathered round the mother-hen, for red-roofed cottages clustered round a church, either with spire or square, squat tower, and seemed to nestle in its shadow.

On the outskirts of these were scattered farmsteads, each with brave show of stacks and close-shaven fields, from which the golden grain was nearly garnered in ; with cattle wading in clear brooks, and sheep nibbling the short sweet herbage, and raising their meek heads to look at the train as it passed. They had reached the rich, wide farmlands of Yorkshire.

"Low Cross—Low Cross !" said Kate, half to herself ; "when shall we see it ? It is a quaint name, like the rest. Tell me, why was it called so ? Is there a cross, broad and low, golden-green with lichen, in the courtyard or the avenue ? Or perhaps there has been a private chapel once ?"

"No, no, no," he said, in a sort of restrained frenzy.

"Kate, do not think of my people as other than they are ; they are plain, unpretending, simple folks."

A nervous flutter was stealing over Kate ; the train was slackening speed ; she did not notice her husband's strange manner.

"It does not matter what they are," she said, catching her breath short as she spoke ; "they are yours ; and, oh, John ! do you think they will like me ? They must be so proud of you, dear ; they must think no one good enough for you."

"Like you," he said, flinging his arm about her shoulders, and crushing her to him with a passion of tenderness.
"My darling, who could help liking you ? I could not !"

CHAPTER III.

AMONG SIMPLE FOLK.

THE little station of Wiffle showed signs of a mild excitement. It was such a very insignificant station that a great excitement might have carried it away altogether. Often but one solitary passenger would be discharged as the train waited a couple of minutes or so ; sometimes only a dog, occasionally nothing but a basket ; only very few trains stopped there at all, so that the porter had an easy time of it, and the station-master plenty of leisure to cultivate his garden, which he did so successfully that you would have thought sometimes a flower show was being held on the line, and the train had stopped to give the passengers time to have a good look at it.

However, on the evening of which we are now writing, as has been said before, signs of a languid interest were visible at Wiffle station. The porter kept dusting the sleeves of his black fustian jacket with his hand, as though he were resolved to show himself presently to the greatest possible advantage. The station-master, in a new coat, stood at attention before his wonderful display of single dahlias, as who should say : "I defy anyone to find fault either with me or my flower-garden." The station dog, a mongrel of an ardent and enquiring turn of mind, ran up and down, giving short, sharp barks of agitated curiosity, and now and again sniffing at the heels of a sort of handy-man, half coachman, half gardener—anything you please, in fact—who, possessed by the spirit of an overpowering

self-importance, carried himself as one entitled to have "high ways," and bestowed quite a condescending nod upon the station-master and his dahlias, being apparently not in the least impressed by either.

A puff of white smoke among the far-off trees, a whir of distant wheels, another puff, nearer at hand this time, and the whir coming closer every moment.

The evening train had arrived, and everyone on the station stared his hardest at young Mrs. Granger as, preceded by her husband, she stepped out upon the platform that was all ablaze with the last ruddy sheen of the sun bidding good-night to the world in a royal burst of splendour. In that lovely radiance the station-master's dahlias looked like glorified flowers, and every casement in his little, squat toy-house a square of opal. The bells of a tiny church hard by were ringing, just three of them, falling over one another, and tripping one another up most musically, making, indeed, the most of themselves, and setting up quite a merry jangle. There had been a wedding that morning at Wiffle, so someone else's wedding bells welcomed Bonnie Kate home.

The handy-man rushed up to John, touched his hat, and made himself mightily busy about the luggage, yet kept looking round the corner of his eye at Kate, who stood, tall and slim, her simple grey dress and hat glorified like the dahlias, opposite the station-master's house.

On her sweet face was a strange look of bewilderment ; the delicate colour in her cheek had faded somewhat, and if you had laid your hand above her heart you might have felt it beating more heavily than was well. John, too, was pale and grave, and his voice sounded strained, as he said to the nondescript man :

"All well at home, Matthew?"

"Yes, Maister John," replied that functionary ; "they be all foine up whoam, save the mistress, who's a bit poorly."

Mrs. Granger, of Low Cross, had been what is called in that part of the world "laid by" for nigh upon sixteen years,

but old Matthew always spoke as if her indisposition were a passing and casual matter, deeming it more dignified—or, as he said, “becoming”—to keep up a certain reserve as to family matters in the Granger family, there being, in his estimation, no other family to speak of in Yorkshire or out of it.

Meanwhile Kate, struggling against a feeling that all her new and unlooked-for surroundings were but part and parcel of a dream, from which she should presently wake, kept good command over herself, and said a few courteous words to the station-master as to the beauty of his flower-garden.

Red as one of his own dahlias with gratified pride, he told the lady all in grey how that his wife was not so strong as she might be, and how it pleased her to look through the windows and see the posies blowing, adding that no station-master’s garden for miles up the line, and down the line, could boast such a show as his.

Here John came to her side—John as she had never yet seen or known him—pale, grave, with a dull, pained look in the eyes usually so clear and shining, with a quiver about his mouth that even tawny moustache and beard could not hide.

“Come, Kate,” he said ; “everything is ready.”

The station-master watched the pair across the platform and through the door that had “Way Out” painted above it in gigantic letters—a futile precaution, since no other way of any kind existed ; then he turned to his wife, who had come creeping out into the sunlight, and said, with many nods and shakes of the head :

“If I’d just wed yon bonnie lady, I’d never show such a sorry face over it as t’ young maister there—not I ! Eh, but she’s properly sweet-spoken, that is she, and as dainty a bit as one o’ these posies here !”

He flipped a pearl-white dahlia lightly with his hand, and went into his square house, leaving his wife and the porter to exchange glances of admiration at the master’s way of putting things.

“Such talk !” said the porter. “Why, it’s as good as

readin' to hear till it, and full of great truth too, missus, for he had a sorry look had Maister Granger, and no mistake. Matthew he told me the wedded folk were a-coming by this train, an' I dusted mysel' up a bit, and set my cap a trifle on one side to give me a jaunty look ; bo' I doan't think they took ony note on it, not they, and he had a sorry look !"

Maybe the speaker would have still more emphatically called John Granger's look a "sorry" one could he have seen his face as he drove along by Kate's side in a vehicle known by the term "gig," with Matthew Goldstraw on a high seat in front, much incommoded by the most necessary of the luggage appertaining to the pair. Commonplace and conventional remarks upon the verdure of the lanes through which they passed, the picturesque beauty of the hills that girt them round on every side, their ridges ablaze with gorse and yellow broom ; but no converse of a more intimate nature, no allusion to the meeting with John's people now so near at hand.

Matthew's remarkable attire drew Kate's attention in spite of herself, and beginning to feel by this time conscious of a strain upon her nerves, she had some ado to keep from a half-hysterical laugh. Assuredly the old family servitor (for in her mind was no doubt that such was his position and office) had hit upon most incongruous garments in which to go and meet his young master and his bride. His hat was banded with crape, so deep that it projected above the shallow crown. His neck was encircled by a scarf combining all the prismatic hues of the rainbow. He ended in leggings, and boasted a pair of dogskin gloves several sizes too big for him, and of which he was evidently abnormally conscious. Accustomed to the plain yet perfect style of the Pierrepont liveries, and the luxury of Aunt Cynthia's victoria, the conveyance in which Kate now found herself, together with its charioteer, struck her as wondrous strange indeed, but she would not permit herself to show the faintest sign of amaze. To look at her you might have thought she had ridden in a gig all her life. The

animal that drew the said gig left no room for fault-finding, and Matthew was evidently prepared for some commendation of her points.

"The mare is in good condition, I see," said John, as they turned round a corner and entered upon a narrow lane whose hedges were just great tangles of ragwort, fruiting hops, and honey suckle.

"Yiss, Maister John," replied Matthew, with an air of unbounded pride; "her be's as keen as ever; her be's the keenest mare i' these parts, I reckon. T' maister he woan't have her worked on t' farm, not he. He keps her fer t' days when he goes t' the market towns to sell grain. He makes t' other maisters sit up, that does he, when he shows her off in front o' the inns where he puts up. He bean't ashamed of her at church nor market, as the sayin' goes in these parts, and he's in the right on it too, for she's a keen mare and no mistake. Why, she takes the hills like a burred, and never a shy out of her—'cept whiles and again—at an ironstone pit, no matter how yaller it is, nor how deep it yawns alongside of her. There bean't her ekal, Maister John, all the country-side. Folks 'ull turn to look at her, that will they, and Farmer Granger's mare o' Low Cross, that is,' they'll say, 'that's a-nudging one another loike so many schoolboys gapin' at a dumpling. I trust, sir, as your good lady here thinks well o' t' mare?" This with an anxious look round at Kate.

"Maister John's good lady" had a very white face, and her lips were no longer ripe and red, as was their wont, but they smiled at the garrulous old man, and assured him of her admiration of the keen mare.

The sun had sunk behind the fir trees on ahead; the garish, ruddy light was gone. Above, a pale moon-face looked through the blue, and a lark, rising from some furrowed land hard by, hung high in heaven, quivering with the ecstasy of his song. Now and again a flock of wide-winged swifts dropped from the sky, over which a faint grey mist was

stealing, falling with shrill cries towards earth ; then, rising, wheeled once more aloft, and so away.

Was that weird cry echoed in a beating human heart ? Did that tearful moon-face look down pityingly through the veil of the growing twilight upon the sufferings of a passionate, undisciplined woman, brought face to face with the first real trial of her hitherto bright young life ?

It is in such moments of sudden pain that Nature speaks to our hearts most closely. Which of us has not listened to Robin's plaintive evensong, and recognised in it the voice of our own sadness, or read, in the lilt of the thrush in springtime, the longing of our own heart for one that is set far from us ? The sough and the sigh of the sea seems the sob that we dare not utter ; the moan of the wind in the branches gives a voice to the passionate cry that is stifled within us.

For years and years to come Kate never heard the shrill cry of the shrike in the stillness of evening that she did not call to mind that fateful drive from the little station of Wiffle to the gate of Low Cross Farm.

For that was its real name, and there it faced her in its broad, substantial comfort, its homely wealth of sufficiency, its red-tiled gables and roofs, its wide casement windows wreathed with jasmine and old-fashioned climbing roses ; its garden, with London Pride edging the pathways, and round white cobbles paving them, with two tall box-trees, one on either side the white gate, each cut into the semblance of a gigantic mushroom on a mighty stem.

Rich rows of corn-stacks stretched on one side the house like Brobdingnagian beehives, each sheltered from storm and tempest under a roof of its own, a roof propped up on slender fir-poles. The mellow lowing of cattle came from a range of sheds beyond, and, laid all along on the wall of the straw-yard, a peacock, his green-gold tail drooping behind him more graceful than any lady's court-train, was taking his last observation of the world before going to roost in the cedar-

tree. Over the door of the house was a porch weighted with a cowl of clustering honeysuckle. The house itself was white, intersected by massive black beams, and all round, running between the upper and lower windows, was an inscription in old English letters : "God's Providence is My Inheritance." Did that old-world message—that brave and trustful assertion of the right that is every man's—the right to the love and tender care of the Great Father of all—did those noble words hold any comfort for the tossed and troubled soul of the woman whose heavy eyes were raised to them ? Did they remind her that no one could wrest from her that "inheritance" which is most ours when most men fail us—when amidst what is mutable and unstable, we most long for a stay that is immutable and that fadeth not away ?

Not yet—not yet !

Bitterness—wounded pride—a sense of trust outraged, and confidence betrayed—all these ran riot in Kate's hot, ungoverned heart : there was no place for comfort—yet.

The door of Low Cross Farm stood widely open ; and there, under the shadow of the honeysuckle and eglantine, stood three female figures ; one upright, rigid, determined ; the other two shrinking back and leaning towards each other, as though for mutual protection in a crisis—Aunt Libbie and the twin girls Leah and Rachel.

At the gate stood a stalwart, sturdy man of middle age, with a look of John about the head, but of John broadened and coarsened, and with shrewd, dark eyes and ruddy cheek. Dressed in leggings, mighty hob-nailed boots, and dark-ribbed fustian coat, Thomas Granger, farmer, was a notable figure, one of a class of whom England has every right to be proud—a class above all pretension, and, taken as a class, pure-lived, honest, and fair in dealing, healthy in body and mind from living so much in the open air.

"Glad to see you, John," said Mr. Granger, in a loud, cheery voice when the gig was still a considerable distance off. "Glad to see you," he said again, almost shaking his son's

hand off when they had reached the gate and John had sprung to the ground.

Kate was quickly handed down and shaken by the hand, too ; but mine host of Low Cross had a shy look now, and his voice was a bit husky as he said :

“ Wish you joy——” and oh ! could Kate be mistaken, or did he really finish his sentence, when repeated, thus : “ Wish you joy—m’um ! ”

She saw John, bending over a portmanteau, flush dark red to the roots of his hair. Then she knew that she had heard aright.

Well, well ; a little more or a little less, what did it matter now ?

With all the deep turmoil of spirit underneath, what did such a mere ripple on the surface count for ?

The jolly farmer soon recovered his self-possession, disturbed momentarily by the delicate vision of Kate in her dainty grey dress and drooping grey ostrich plumes.

“ Libbie,” he cried, showing the new-comer the way in, “ here’s John’s wife—bid her welcome, my lass.”

A tall, straight, angular figure, clad in a sort of steel-coloured garment that fell in straight, shining folds, came forward at this on to the doorstep, stretched forth a hard unsympathetic hand, first to Kate and then to John, and said :

“ I bid you welcome, Nephew John. And so this is your wife. I hope she’ll no find us over plain and simple to be quite to her mind. It’s well you’ve come up north, for brother had set his mind on’t something terrible. I reckon he’d have been greatly crossed if you’d set my letter aside.”

“ Well, Aunt Libbie, you see we didn’t set your letter aside,” said John, trying hard to be himself once more, yet hardly letting his eyes meet his wife’s sad, questioning gaze.

Aunt Libbie was of spare build, wiry and active. Her hair was twisted into a most lamentably tight, hard knob at the top of her head, and skewered through with one strong

hairpin, worn white at the top end with service. She wore an apron with a bib, that held a little pence-pocket, and a bunch of keys hung from the girdle of her gown. She had grey eyes, alert and observant, needing no glasses to aid them, and lips that seemed to part unwillingly when she smiled.

"And I asked John if she was like Aunt Cynthia to look at!" thought Kate, as she took a rapid mental inventory of these characteristics.

Mr. Granger himself seemed to feel a certain uneasiness in the general atmosphere, and looked sharply at his sister.

"What matter, Libbie, how I might ha' been crossed, since I'm not crossed? You're always too full of words, my girl, and setting folks by the hair o' their heads. Bless us all!" he continued, giving his stalwart thigh a sounding slap, "here be the two lassies all agog to see the fine Lunnon lady as their brother John's brought whoam wi' him."

Two tall, fresh-looking girls, with freckled faces and warm-tinted hair done up in great bunches behind, but breaking out into all sorts of little curls and twirls about their shy, rosy faces, came forward and shook hands with Kate, evidently glad when the ceremony was over. As to the "fine Lunnon lady," she was looking at them with a look of fear and bitter trouble in her beautiful brown eyes, with a tremble about her lips, with brows knitted in a little pucker of puzzlement, with all the sweet red colour gone from cheek and lip. Her heart felt like some chalice into which drops of bitterness were falling so fast, that soon the cruel flood must overflow the brim.

As for Leah and Rachel, they fell back into the shadow of the great oaken presses that lined one side of the house-place, oak black with age, and shining like a mirror—and then Rachel pinched Leah, and whispered in her ear :

"She's bonnie to look at, anyway, though Miss Sweetapple's ever so much spryer, and wears a finer hat."

To which Leah, gentler and less sharp than the younger sister, answered not without pathos in her tone :

"I reckon she'll never care to see the little black kittens, nor the white calfy, neither."

Meanwhile, Aunt Libbie, with the air of one who leads a forlorn hope, had marched up the steep oaken stairs to show Kate into all the glories of the guest-chamber.

It was a pretty, wholesome chamber in very truth : low in the roof, with broad beams crossing it, and almost resting on the high bed, with its carved head and posts, and dimity curtains. The windows were wide and low, and touched the eaves, so that the twittering of the swallows seemed as close as though the little busy things were part and parcel of the family inside. Flowers thrust their sweet faces in at these casements whenever they got the chance by a pane being set back in the stanchions, and all sweet country scents came floating in, notably that of lavender, sweet lavender that even the homespun towels smelt of as you buried your face in their shining folds.

Each of the two windows boasted a wide, low window seat cushioned in crimson, tempting lounges to nestle in, in company with a favourite author—in which to read Shelly's "Skylark" or Shakespeare's sonnets. But not a book was to be seen, save a brown-covered Bible and prayer-book set neatly atop of one another on the oak drawers, and not a flower was anywhere, save those that peeped in at the window.

"The meal won't be long, as it's ready," said Aunt Libbie, whisking away an imaginary speck of dust from the bevelled-edged mirror on the dressing-table, "so we'd best leave Mrs. John to smarten up a bit."

This was addressed to the twins, who had squeezed themselves in through the smallest possible space of open door, and were indulging in fond but futile hopes that Mrs. John might open a good-sized flattish box that had been hauled upstairs by a red-cheeked, red-handed Phyllis, assisted by old Matthew.

"Happen she's got something a bit brighter-coloured in that," said Rachel, secretly regarding the bride's pale-grey

gown with much disfavour. Leah assented, but only in a half-hearted sort of way, adding, with a sigh significant of much : "I think she's real bonnie as she be——"

Just as Aunt Libbie was leaving the room, driving, so to speak, the twins before her, Kate stopped her, laying a soft, detaining hand upon the tight, uncompromising steel-coloured sleeve, with the white turned-up cuffs that looked as if they were made of white crockery ware.

"Where is Humbie?" she said.

It was strange how all her aching heart turned to the thought of Humbie, the boy who was "not like other folk." It was strange how madly she felt ready to stretch out her hands to this unknown brother, who was now hers as well as John's. Of the old Richmond house by the river, of the General, of Aunt Cynthia, of dear, bright, laughing Will, she did not dare to think ; did not dare to let her mind rest a moment on them. There are moments in life when to think of those who love us, and whom we love, is weakness, not strength ; look back we dare not, look forward we must.

It was so with Kate now ; she let herself be led by a blind and unreasoning instinct. So she said :

"Where is Humbie?"

There was the faintest possible toss of the bob at the top of Aunt Libbie's head.

"Humbie was taken with the shies ; he is now and again. Happen John's told you the lad isn't like other folk !"

"I know—I know," said Kate, and not all the hard amaze in Miss Libbie's face could strangle a little sob that cut the words in two ; "but that could make no difference to me. I shall only love him the more—only love him the more."

It seemed as though her knees gave way under her. She sank upon the window seat, her hands wrung one in the other. Miss Libbie stared—as, indeed, was only natural ; and there is every reason to suppose she was firmly of opinion that her nephew John had brought some poor hysterical idiot into the sacred circle of Low Cross Farm ! nor

can it be doubted that a certain persistent prejudice against Kate dated from that unfortunate moment.

"Humbie is there—out in the meadow with John," said Miss Libbie, this time with a very decided toss of the head, "he's making a fool of the boy as usual."

Kate craned forward to the open window.

There below, walking up and down the meadow, as the mown green expanse that flanked that side of the house was called, were John and a boy about sixteen or so, slender and misshapen. John had his arm on the other's bowed shoulder, and was speaking to him earnestly ; but, as Kate appeared at the window, both brothers looked up.

John smiled, but it was a smile that died even in its birth. Humbie, looking upwards, showed to Kate's eager gaze a face of wondrous and refined beauty, too large in outline for the dwarfed height and thickened back that supported it, but with such clear shining eyes, such a sad, tender smile, that, as John said : "Kate, this is Humbie. He was shy, and hid himself away from us, but I have brought him out," all her heart warmed to the boy, and she leaned farther out among the tangle of roses and jasmine, and both John and Humbie thought there was no fairer flower among them all than she.

Another pair of eyes looked up at Kate among the greenery besides the brothers', eyes of a golden liquid brown, each spotted above with a tawny stain—the wonderful, intelligent, speaking eyes of a noble spaniel-retriever, black above, tawny below, with feathered legs and tail, and such a silky coat that it felt like floss silk beneath your hand.

"Oh, what a lovely dog !" said Kate.

"His name is Jack. He is glad to see you, I am sure," said Humbie ; "he is trying his best to say so."

Jack shoved his nose into his master's hand, and swept his grand tail from side to side.

The timbre of Humbie's voice, his mode of speech—these things differed as light from darkness from the rest of the farm household. Kate felt that he stood upon an equal social

plane with John—that he would understand, help, sympathise—that she was already less alone.

Jack whined, lifting his “four-eyed” face towards the window.

“He wants you to come down,” said Humbie, smilingly.

So Kate went, not smartened up one bit, to the desperate disappointment of Rachel, who nudged Leah and made that simple maid turn as red as the cherry-coloured ribbon about her neck.

As the three paced slowly together over the sweet cropped grass of the meadow, Humbie’s mind grew full of wonder. Were all newly-married people so subdued, so constrained towards each other as these? Was it a mark of the condition, as of a new garment in which one is ill at ease? Why did John look so strange, and Kate so sad? Surely no queen could be more stately or more beautiful than this peerless lady, stepping so daintily, with her pale sheeny dress brushing the short grass, while dear old Jack lifted his pathetic eyes to her face, and silently, dog-fashion, entreated her to take him at once into her heart as a loving and faithful vassal?

And yet John seemed ill at ease, and Kate’s fair, white hand hung listless at her side, instead of being clasped in his.

Humbie has just been reading “Ivanhoe,” and it seemed to him that here was a living, breathing Rowena who had stepped into his life, and shown him that romance might be a reality.

But was not the “lade’s good knighth” somewhat in surly mood?

Whatever mood anybody was in, Miss Libbie quickly summoned them to the “evening meal,” as she termed it, a summons that Jack obeyed with the rest, just giving his pink tongue a turn round his muzzle, and showing a gleam of ivory teeth, in anticipation of good things to come, but trotting back at the last to be sure that his new friend Kate was coming with the rest.

In winter time it was the custom at the farm to have

tea in the vast kitchen, with its walls glinting with the shimmer of every utensil that could be made to shine, its substantial table of massive grey-brown oak, and its great cooking-place, with the "reckon," or crane, in its midst, hanging from stout crooks that could well bear any possible strain, and rendered an important item in household gear by a superstition, still reverenced in many a Yorkshire homestead, that if the reckon swing empty the angels will weep, and sorrow come to the home.

As in many another case, this bit of folklore covers a pretty thought. In olden times, when there were no workhouses and no organised—ahem ! how often badly organised !—system of relief for them, the needy and the weary went from door to door, as in dear, faulty Ireland even now, and the broth in the reckon was ready to hand. If the reckon stood empty, then the poor wayfarer had no dole, and so "the angels wept" for a charitable deed left undone.

Well, well, no fear of the angels or anyone else weeping because the reckon at Low Cross swung cold and empty. There it was, puffing and bubbling over the bright wood fire to be seen through the open door across the passage that ran between the kitchen and the house-place—a wide, low room into which you entered direct from the hall down two shallow steps of oak. Indeed, there was oak everywhere—oak to drive a collector of such things mad, and Mr. Granger was much given to telling how a gentleman from the great house—Steady Hall, of which, in winter time, when the boughs were bare, you could just catch a glimpse through the trees that backed the meadow—had offered him "a matter of fifty pound" for one of the great presses that lined the side of the entrance hall from floor to ceiling. In the centre of the house-place, on a long table was spread forth such a repast as never before had greeted the eyes of Bonnie Kate. Tea and ale, apple-pie, preserved bilberries, cakes hot, cakes cold, butter and honey, and, oh ! marvellous innovation to southern eyes, cheese white and new in close juxtaposition to plum-loaf, with

which it was eaten, and eggs piled up like beer-barrels in a brewery yard. At the head of this hospitable board, near the tea-tray—which was a marvel of brilliant colour—sat Miss Libbie, her black-mitten hands folded, and looking grim enough to turn the big-bellied white jugs of cream and milk as sour as so much rennet.

"Ask a blessing, brother," she said, almost before the family party was fairly seated.

She spoke in a tone of voice that might well suggest much obstinacy and opposition on the part of the master of the house in this matter of "a blessing"—a crying injustice, since no more godly and simple soul existed in the four Ridings than Thomas Granger of Low Cross.

Next she informed Kate that the daylight "stayed" a good while these evenings, and it was, therefore, possible to save in the matter of candles, a remark that made her brother glare over the rim of his teacup. When Miss Libbie was in these humours he was apt to say the wind was "set east, and nippin' at that"—a fact he no doubt realised painfully on the present occasion.

But he was in a mood to make the best of things, and, quick to seize upon a pleasant opening, jerked his thumb towards Kate, who sat at the corner of the table, and against whose lap Jack had laid his black and tawny head, his feathered ears pricked up, and his wistful eyes raised to her face.

"A good sign that—eh, John?" said Mr. Granger, with a broad, glad grin. "Dogs be knowin' critters, so they be; I've oft-times thought as they can read the hearts o' folks better than we."

Kate bent over the beautiful dog-face, passing her hand over and over the silk-soft ears, but she could not see Jack's fond and grateful looks for the mist that came between.

After this things went better; Humbie told of dogs that had been household gods at Low Cross; especially one fiend in canine form who had had to be made what is called "an apple-tree dog"—that is, hung by the neck upon an apple-

bough until he was dead, since his weakness for young turkeys (of whom he slew a dozen at one time) would yield to no milder treatment. This gave Kate heart to tell of Grippe (though she choked a little when she began), and of his deprivations in the hen-roost, and the solitary life he led in consequence.

But this social calm proved, like many another, "too bright to last." Kate held out her cup, and asked for another lump of sugar.

Miss Libbie drew up, and all the muscles in her throat stood out like little strings.

She handed the sugar basin to her guest with an arm as straight as a rail.

"We Yorkshire folk are apt to be close-neaved in such matters," she said, "and they do say a sweet tooth's a wasteful tooth; but take what you will, being as you're one of the family."

John writhed on his chair, as Kate, puzzled and stung, looked first wonderingly at Miss Libbie and then round at the rest, the lily of her cheek, so pale before, turning to a rich red rose.

The farmer breathed hard, and set his saucer of tea down with a smack.

"Dang thy close-neaved ways, Libbie! Let's hear none o' that. Give the lass what she's a mind to. John's wife can please hersel'. Doan't you stint yoursel', Mrs. John, but tak' whatever you've a mind to. We like folks to tak' their fill of victuals and lack for nowt. Tak' no heed on her—tak' no heed on her."

This episode naturally made things very difficult, but Humbie threw himself into the breach, and asked if Mrs. John had yet seen mother.

"No," replied John promptly; "I ran up to her for a moment, and she said she would see Kate after tea. I hardly think mother looks even as well as usual," he continued, dreading a silence.

"A—h! poor lass—poor lass!" said the farmer, with a slow shake of the head and a mighty sigh. "It's a sorry business about Susie."

Like old Matthew, he always spoke of his wife's helpless state as if it were a matter of yesterday or last week at the furthest, though for sixteen long years those once active feet had never trod the stairs of the old house to which he had brought her, a blithe and bonny bride.

"Go, Leah, he said presently, "and ask mother if Mrs. John shall come ben——"

For the first time since their arrival at Low Cross Kate directly addressed her husband :

"John, I should like to see your mother. I hope she will let me go to her."

In a few moments Leah returned, not without a certain look of awe upon her face.

"John, mother says she'd like your wife to go up to her now; but she's to go quite alone—no one's to go along with her—not even you."

CHAPTER IV.

ON HOLY GROUND.

IT would be well for us to strive to enter into the character and nature of this Bonnie Kate whose story we are telling. By grasping it fully we shall see as we go on how it came about, all naturally enough, that she loved, suffered, fell into bitter error, joyed, sorrowed, sinned, and repented as she did ; for it is sometimes the noblest-natured that go furthest astray, the most loving souls that rush most blindly on their own destruction.

From a child she had been remarkable for the intensity of her feelings ; and in her deep-set eyes those who had true intuitions to guide them, read the wistfulness of a passionate soul looking out at life and questioning its possibilities. Hotly espousing the cause of the weak against the strong, she would rush on without thought, and with all the heat and passion of ignorance, to a championship sometimes harmful, still oftener unwise. Trustful to a fault where she loved, but apt to fall into a great exposition of scorn where she detected treachery ; absolutely without feminine curiosity about trifles or the affairs of those who were indifferent to her, but pathetically curious about all and everything—small things as well as great—concerning those dear to her ; ready, too, to defend such to the death against misfortune, calumny, or pain, so long as she believed them worthy of defence, and loyal as she knew herself to be ; but hardly yet schooled enough in the discipline of life to

know that a woman, if she would rise to the highest heights, must possess her soul in patience, and love on in spite of the death of illusion, must hold only the closer to it because some idol she has reared upon an unreal pedestal comes toppling from its height—these lessons Kate had not learned at all, much less learnt by heart.

Her life had been too sheltered, her will too much law to those about her; and so this bonnie flower of womanhood, this generous, loving-hearted girl, had grown to be a wee bit headstrong, passionately longing to be good and true, but fully determined to be both things in her own way, and in accordance with her own standard—resolved, too, to exact the same measure from those she took into her heart and life. Well had General Pierrepont, wise with the keen insight into men and things that the nearness of death oftentimes gives to the thoughtful soul, said that Kate's was a dangerous nature for any man to undertake to guide and to satisfy. Gay and sprightly as she was by nature, those about her saw a strange deepening of life and thought come over her as love in its deepest sense touched, held, swayed her to its mighty power. Her whole being was, as it were, hushed as is the heart by the hearing of sweet and solemn music. Beneath this unwonted silence lay a sense of passionate joy. It was not so much that she was glad to believe herself beloved, to believe herself the soul and completeness of John Granger's life, as that she lived surrounded by an atmosphere of still shining; that she moved on day by day along a pathway whereon the sun ever rested, and where birds sang low, yet jubilant.

She smiled to herself sometimes to think that John hardly understood how she loved him, but that he would learn all about it better and better year by year; she even loved to think of the trials and troubles that would be sure to come, because then she would be able to help, comfort, and sustain him, and by the exquisite perfection of her sympathy make the “rough places plain,” and the “desert to blossom as the rose.”

When Miss Libbie's letter reached them in their island retreat, and Kate developed such an earnest longing to obey its summons, John said :

" You will find it dull, dear. You are not used to the dead life of a country place like ours."

But the wilful lass shook her gracious head, and said :

" Nay, but it was her pleasure and her will to go," and then, with a shyness born of the newness of her wifehood, could not go on to tell him all her heart. " How little he thinks," she pondered, smiling, and watching with dreamy eyes the golden sunlight on the sea. " that it will be happiness enough to me to look about me and remind myself that here he played when a boy, there he wandered when the idea of life began to open before him! Then what delight to see those who loved him and watched over him before I knew the world held such a man, and to hear them tell of droll things, and beautiful things he did and said. I shall weary them out with questions."

These were Kate's day-dreams by the sea. What the reality came to we know.

And now we will return to her as she rose to cross the house-place, her husband holding the door open for her, and Jack, evidently in no mind to be parted from his new friend, following in stately and assured style.

Miss Libbie sniffed audibly as Kate and her attendant disappeared. Her whole active, useful life was marred by the perpetual mental attitude of considering herself slighted, and now that Susan should wish to see Mrs. John alone seemed as the last straw to bear the suffering camel down. After one glance at his sister's face; the farmer got up, whistling his favourite tune, " Garry Owen," and betook himself to the shippens, there to harry the various men who were looking after the soft-eyed, dun-coloured Alderneys, and tossing the straw for the night in each roomy stall.

" T' maister's oot o' sorts to-night," said one yokel to another, leaning in a contemplative attitude on the handle of a pitchfork.

"Ay; I reckon t' mistress has been a-naggin' at un," replied the other.

So it had come to this in the long years of the house-mother's helpless pain. Miss Libbie was the mistress to all the hands on the farm, and ruled her kingdom, not exactly with a rod of iron, but, as it were, with a switch not unadorned with thorns.

Rachel had volunteered to be Kate's guide to mother's room. She had a fancy for a nearer view of the way that grey gown was cut at the back, to discover what gave it that graceful fall and flow that seemed simplicity itself, and yet (for Rachel was what is called a sharp lass) her instinct told her would be hard to copy in a thoroughly satisfactory manner. But there was no need for any other guide than Jack, who quickly constituted himself the pioneer of the party, looking back every now and then to be sure that Kate was following, until at the end of a long passage, where more oak presses and a couple of casements with cushioned window seats had to be passed, he shoved open a door with his soft nose, trotted in, leaving it open as a hint that that was the way, and so up to a white-curtained bed, upon whose patchwork coverlet he laid his head with a low whimper of pleasure; such a sound as a little child, too young to articulate, makes at sight of something that attracts it. But for once John Granger's mother had no eyes for Jack—no eyes for anything or anyone save John's wife, who, as Rachel shut the door, came across the room, a little timidly, yet with an eager brightness on her face.

Which of us cannot look back into our lives and recall that supreme moment in which someone—man or woman—crossed our pathway, never to part company with us again? All the surroundings of that meeting and that greeting (commonplace, perhaps, in the extreme) dwell in our memory for ever, taking an almost humorous colouring as time goes on, since the first faint notes of a melody that was to grow, and thrill, and tremble to the very core and heart of life, seem to have

become ludicrously inadequate, and we are half impatient with ourselves for not having recognised them as something apart from all other, even then.

Never in all her after life—in all its tossing troubles, all its desolations, all its strayings from the straight path, all its devious returning to the clear shining that illumines us when we walk where the light of heaven touches the plains and hills of earth, did Kate forget this, her first meeting with John Granger's mother.

The faint stirring of the snowy dimity curtains of the wide projecting casement, into which you mounted by a shallow step ; the open pane set back, and the pink-faced roses peeping in, looking pale and ghostly in the fast-fading light ; the little table with a lamp, whose subdued radiance fell upon the open pages of a Bible, where some careless hand had left a straggling spray of briony ; and there beyond, more in the shadow, the pale, spiritual face of a woman, worn and chiselled by the hand of pain and isolation to the beautiful likeness of a resignation perfect in its unquestioning faith and simplicity. A close-frilled cap, delicately goffered, and of a purity as of driven snow, encircled this spirit-face, showing up its worn outlines beneath the still dark banded hair, and out of it, tender, pathetic, questioning, looked John's eyes,—brighter, deeper than his, but still the sweet reflection of those very eyes that had looked into hers long since, and compelled the love in her heart to spring into life and fulness.—They met Kate's with wistful longing, while a hand, worn to match the face, was stretched out for hers.

“Is this John's wife ?” said a gentle voice ; and both look and voice were so pure and tender that Kate felt as though she were in some holy place, into which it would be a sin and desecration to bring the unruly passions and jealous doubts of the world outside.

For the moment—if only for that—the hurt amaze of the day's revelations died out of her heart. She was, for the time being, only a woman who had but just learnt the full

sweetness of loving and being loved—only a woman, seeing for the first time the mother who had given life to the one beloved, who had tended his childhood's days, who could tell her endless precious lore of that far-off time, who could sympathise, as no other living creature could, with the tenderness that had welled up in her heart for him as a living fountain, almost from the first hour of their meeting.

She sank upon her knees by the bed, clasping the gentle hand in both her own, and laying it softly against her cheek.

“Yes,” she said, with a little strangled sob in her breath, “I am John’s wife Kate, and I am so glad—so glad that you have let me come to you like this.”

In the excitement and agitation of the moment, Kate did not note a strange, startled look of wonder, trouble, almost fear, that came upon the sick woman’s face, and when she looked up it had passed, leaving, however, an added pallor on the thin cheek, a tremble round the patient mouth.

“It’s good of you to speak so kind ; we sick folk think a lot o’ kind words.”

Seeing that Mrs. Granger was agitated, Kate, fearful of adding to her agitation, made no reply save that of gently stroking the hand still clasped in hers.

A little blackcap in a larch tree hard by the open casement began to warble his evening song ; the curtains stirred, gently swaying in the breeze that had begun to buffet the flowers and make the pale roses nod their heads ; and Jack, who was gravely watching the frivolous swallows as they fluttered under the broad eaves, now and then looked round at the kneeling figure by the bed, gently lashing his tail on the floor, as if to assure Kate that he was perfectly comfortable, and hoped she was the same.

“Jack seems to have taken quite a fancy to me,” said Kate at last, breaking the silence with a commonplace, in the hope of stilling the hot beat of the fevered pulse beneath her fingers, “and—your husband says it is a good sign.”

"I should think no one could well be off takin' a fancy to you, my dear," and Mrs. Granger touched the coronal of ruddy brown hair that was so near her shoulder, all gently and timidly. "How long have you and John bin wed?"

Up flew the rosy colour into Kate's cheek.

"Surely you know. John wrote—did he not?"

"Happen he did, but my head's apt to be weak at times. Things grow to seem dim and distant-like when all the days are like each other."

"It is nearly three weeks since our wedding-day," said Kate, though even as she spoke it seemed to her it might have been three years, three-score a thousand years, measured by thought, and not by time. "I wanted to send you some wedding-cake, but John said you wouldn't care about it."

"Did he? Well, anyway, I'd like to have seen it. Was it well set? There's a deal in the way a cake's mixed. In all the lot they've made since I was laid by I've never seen one as looked as if it had bin mixed same as I'd used to mix the simnel and the Easter flats. I'd a way of my own, I can tell you. When our master's niece Eliza were wed, they sent all along for me to mix the cake, and I mind John went with me. He were a stripling thing of seven or so, his eyes bright as stars, his hair curled all over his head. I were as proud as proud—and I mind old Farmer Dale sayin' to me teatime, 'Yon's as bonnie a lad as I've seen this many a day, Mistress Granger.' But how I run on—how I run on. I didn't think I had it in me to be so fullish now-a-days."

"I like to hear it," said Kate, smiling, "I'm sure you made the cake beautifully, and quite sure that the old farmer spoke the truth about John. Do you know I always felt sure, though I don't know why I did, that you had John's eyes. When I saw them looking at me just now as I came into the room, they were just what I had expected—just what I had longed to see."

"I know," put in the sick woman eagerly; "it was just

like that with him from a boy ; people used to stop him in the lanes, struck all at once. I mind being at Wiffle, and the old Lord Whimperdale was there. He had some very high people with him too ; but he didn't care ; he just came up to me, and 'Mrs. Granger,' he says, 'that lad o' yours is something to be proud of ; he's got a bonnie pair of eyes in his head too ; and there's no need to look far neither to see where he got 'em from.' Of course that was his fullish talk ; but he was an old man, and no offence took, none bein' meant."

"I don't think it was foolish at all," said Kate, smiling ; "it was quite true."

For the time being all the bitterness in her heart was forgotten. Her mind had flown back to those precious golden days when first she had seen and known John Granger. She thrilled even now to the memory of their sweetness—to the memory of the divine consciousness of a new pulse of joy beating through and through her life—a pulse throbbing beat for beat with his—of all her high and tender aspirations after the truest and fullest companionship with the man who delighted to honour her with his preference, and whose love seemed to her as a radiant crown, fulfilling the completeness of her womanhood.

As she knelt there by the bed of patient pain in that silent room, where now the lamp began to shine out by reason of the gathering dusk, all that was best in Kate's nature was to the fore ; every generous feeling kindled at the sight of the worn and patient face upon the pillow, and of the mother love and pride that shone in the eyes so like to John's, as his mother spoke of the days of his beautiful boyhood.

"All that seems such a long time back now," continued Mrs. Granger ; "I mean the time when I could get about like other folk and see to things. I'd been brought up notable in house ways, and never sat a minute with my hands folded afore me, or gossiping over the gate, or any such ways, and it seemed agen everything mother had ever taught me to be lying still, never moving hand nor foot—never *moving hand nor foot.*"

A tear slowly trickled down the sunken cheek. The root of the bitterness of the good housewife's trial had been touched upon. She could not "see to things." Pain and weariness were nothing, but the idleness that was a necessity was as a cross too heavy to be borne.

Kate tenderly wiped away the falling tear with her dainty handkerchief, and bent to kiss the place it had bedewed.

"Ah, my dear," said Mrs. Granger, "I am a discontented old woman to grumble like this, I that have so many mercies to be thankful for, and have bin such a sorry trial to others ; but it's your kind face and gentle ways as drew the sorrow from me. I've fancied sometimes (one grows fullish maybe being so much alone) that I've heard my mother's voice sayin' in my ear : 'Can this be my girl Susie lying here day and night, growin' old in her bed, and never putting a hand to nought ?' and I've found no answer in my heart, only this : 'It's the Lord's will, and none of us can go by that.'"

. Just as the last word fell from those pale, patient lips, a long pathetic note of melody came from somewhere just below the room. Jack pricked up his ears, and sat up on end, panting.

"It's Humbie," said Mrs. Granger ; "see, the dog knows his master's touch. Ay, but many's the time Humbie's music's comforted me. It's been like as if it told all the story of what's lain in my heart all the long years—told it all to God, better than I could tell it in words myself."

Then all the air grew sweet with the sound of that violin voice, and some of the sublimest airs that ever Handel gave us to make us wings and carry our souls heavenward, far above earth and all its trials and its sorrows, rang out through the gloaming.

Surely it must be that something in the nature of the north-country folk is closely akin to music. In those northern shires you may many times and oft, in the still summer's evening, hear through the cottage window set back upon its hinges, no popular airs, no "fancy music," as a Yorkshire-

man once expressed it to me, but the works of those great masters of melody, who have done more to sublimate and lift heavenwards the mind and thoughts of men than many preachers. The passionate, pathetic cry of the violin, the velvet softness and mellow tones of the 'cello, these, played by hands that toil all day and rest only at eventide, make the summer nights sweet indeed, and the winter gatherings about the ingle-nook times of refreshment alike to ear and heart.

With Humbie music had been a passion from his childhood. He would steal away from the farm, and be found crouched down outside some cottage-window in the village, or perhaps nestling in the wide chimney-corner curled up like a little cat, listening with all his ears to honest Hodge playing his "bits" from Beethoven or Mozart on the violin that was cherished and tended as much as any child of the family; or he would hang about the church door intent upon the choir practice inside, where the Low Cross village choristers were preparing some surprise for the Rector in the shape of an anthem, with rolling notes in the bass for the violoncello, and a solo for a boy-singer, whose voice apparently came out of the top of his head.

Happy moments for Humbie were these, and as the child grew to boyhood the love of all sweet sounds grew with him, and of love was begotten skill, so that in time his violin became to him as a second self, and spoke to him with sweet, impassioned voice of the pathos of his own life, and of the something that made him "not the same as other folk," but set him apart from his fellows, and made all love bestowed upon him tremulous with a thrill of pity.

"John loves to hear Humbie play," said Mrs. Granger, as the music ceased awhile, and Jack gave a short, sharp bark, then sat listening, as who should say: "Very well played, my master: pray go on."

Kate made no answer. As she had listened to the sweet, pleading sounds of the boy's violin her thoughts had once more flown back to the old home.

It was the evening before their marriage—John's and hers. They two walked side by side in the garden that sloped to the river.

Above their heads the branches met and kissed ; and through this arch of verdure formed by two lindens near the shore they saw Will coming to the bank in his boat. There was the soft crunch of her bow against the pebbles ; the grating of the chain as the boy let it slip into the water under the awning, ere he leapt on shore. His face was pale, his eyes searched the faces of the two so soon to be one. Kate held his arm, and John laid a hand upon his shoulder.

" You will be good to her ? " said Will, a solemn look making his blue eyes deep and dark. " You will be good to Kate—my true Kate ? " and John had answered :

" Will—why, Will, what is this ? Do you not know that I shall cherish her all my life as my most precious possession ? What has put it into your heart to speak to me like this ? "

" A fancy—a boyish fancy," said Will, and passed on into the room where, by the lamplight, Miss Cynthia and the General could be seen seated side by side, as if, in this the hour of parting with their darling, nearness was comfort.

Had John been true to his words of that night ? Had he been " good " to Kate, true to Kate, as she to him ?

Up started the bitterness and the sense of betrayal in Kate's heart. The music, that once again made the now star-flecked night sweet, had no power to still or soothe her pain.

Alack for this loving, impressionable nature, this girl full of a tender enthusiasm for truth and right, looking at life with an air of sweet defiance, ready to err, but never to be unreal, full of passionate pain that what she loved should fall from her own ideal, and as yet unlearned in the lesson of discipline that could alone strengthen her to curb the expression of her suffering.

" I must go now," she said, rising to her feet, and looking away from the face upon the pillow. " I have many things to see to in my room."

"And you are used to be waited on?" said Mrs. Granger, her voice a little tremulous. Then she added timidly: "Mightna' one of the lassies be of any good for helping? They'd be proud, I know well, to do aught for their brother John's wife."

But Kate wanted no help.

Just then she longed to bear all her own burdens, and for no hand, not even John's, to touch even the edge of them. Her head, crowned with its nut-brown coronal, was held high; her cheeks were no longer pale, her eyes were bright and beautiful, and with no mist of tears to dim their radiance.

Again a look of trouble and fear came upon Mrs. Granger's face. She put out her hand and caught Kate's gown.

"Must you go so quick? It's been lovely having you by me, and seeing John's wife as I've thought so much on."

But Kate meant going.

The quiet room; the tender, loving house-mother "laid by," and never more to go about her active service of love in the home; the lamplight falling on the open Bible—it was all so tender, sad, and holy that Kate felt she had no business there while hot anger and wounded pride ran riot in her heart.

Seeing no yielding in her face, Mrs. Granger tried again.

"It canna' be late, for Leah's not bin in to read the evening chapter. Will na' ye stay a while?"

"I will come again to-morrow, if I may," said Kate.

Jack was quickly up and stirring, and the two crossed the room.

But Kate was called back.

"My dear—there's a word I want to say."

What could she do else than turn back to the bedside?

Again Mrs. Granger caught a fold of her gown.

"John's bin a dear good son to me. Will you think on that? A loving son to me."

Then Kate went. In the passage she met Leah.

"I'm going to read the evening chapter," said the girl.

And Kate, lingering in one of the wide window seats, heard her presently :

"Peace I leave with you: My peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth give I unto you."

Even the north-country burr in Leah's voice could not rob this sublime valediction of its transcendent beauty—could not mask to the woman who listened, the fact of how far—how very far away, seemed all peace from her own heart.

Kate went to her room, and closed the door. Such pain as she was experiencing does not abate—rather it feeds upon itself. She busied herself with unpacking all that was needed for the night, all the while hearing, yet as it were being deaf to, the music that, now more distant had begun to sound again. It fell upon her ear; it did not speak to her heart. It was a shock to her to be conscious of a shrinking from seeing John alone; to detect deep down in her troubled thoughts a longing to go—go—go; to find all her surroundings a dream, from which she should presently awake to find herself in the dear old room at home, with Aunt Cynthia singing in the twilight.

She had lit the two tall candles on either hand the quaint, old-fashioned, oval toilet-mirror before John came in.

They stood face to face—pallid, with staring, eager eyes.

"Kate!" he said—"Kate!" and held out both his hands to her.

She turned from him, raising her arms high with an indescribable gesture of anguish. Her voice was faint and hoarse, and fell strangely on his ear:

"Do not speak to me—it is the truest kindness you can show to me. In time I shall be able to bear it better; but now, do not speak, I entreat of you."

"Kate," he cried, striving to look into her averted face, "it was because I loved you so dearly. I tried to tell you all the

truth—indeed I did—many times ; but you were so precious to me. I feared to lose you.”

She turned upon him, and her eyes blazed.

“ You feared to trust me, you mean. You did not think I loved you enough. Well, I did—I did ! I would not have cared. But now—— Oh, have pity on me ; do not speak to me !”

CHAPTER V.

LOW CROSS VILLAGE.

A WOMAN of such strong feelings as Kate Granger was, not likely to be lacking in either dignity or courage. The "little rift within the lute," the discord in the harmony of love to which she had listened entranced, believing its sweetness a thing that could have no variableness neither shadow of turning—these things were bitter indeed to her, so bitter that she could not bear to dwell upon them, but willed that they should be "put past," as the Scotch have it, buried in silence—a silence that she herself respected as she looked for her husband to respect it. She had told him that the touch of words was not to be borne upon the wound his want of trust had made in her heart, and the forbearance she exacted she gave.

In writing to Aunt Cynthia and the General, now *en route* to Madeira, she said :

"John's people are very good to me."

She felt this to be true, because she quickly came to the conclusion that Miss Libbie's close-neaved ways and little sournesses could hardly be called unkind, since they were not meant to be so, and might be looked upon as the prickly rind that enclosed a sound and healthy kernel; while as to the rest, in their simple way they were ready to do all that mortal man or woman could to make her happy, and to show their pride in her. More than once she heard the honest farmer make use in reference to herself of that proverb about "church and market," which had so puzzled her in Miss Libbie's letter,

in what seemed a time now long ago. She no longer started at his jolly laugh, or the sudden slap on his leg when greatly tickled by any of his own jokes. She was, in a word, too clever not to grasp the situation in which she found herself, seize its best points, and quickly realise the picturesque side of Yorkshire farm-life.

Then there was always Humbie—Humbie who watched her with the same look in his eyes as Jack, Humbie who seemed to try and anticipate her every wish, who laid the sweetest little nosegay by her plate every morning, and played to her in the early autumn nights that were still so balmy and so witching.

And there were long walks with John to be enjoyed, times in which—always in both their hearts the consciousness of the buried wrong that slept beneath the sod of silence—half the sweetness of the long days by the sea came back to Kate again, and love was lord of all, even though he bore a wound in his heart of hearts, and, like the pendent crimson of the flower we all know well, might fitly have been called “Poor Love lies bleeding.”

There were fir woods outside Low Cross village, very palaces for the birds and squirrels ; woods where the tall, tasselled trees stood all of a row, cathedral aisles not made by mortal hands, but built by Nature little by little as the years passed by, pillared by slender boles, and roofed with feathered greenery light and beautiful, through which the mellowed light filtered down to the pathway that was strewn with a million pine-needles, giving out a sweet and pungent perfume beneath the pressure of the feet.

Kate was charmed with Low Cross village, with its little square-towered church high up on the hill, at whose foot the clustering cottages nestled ; the verdant hill, so steep, that in summer time, seen from below, the haymakers seemed to be making hay up in the sky, and on Sunday the three soft bell-voices from the tower dropped right from heaven into the bosom of the village beneath. Then the houses, how quaint

they were ; some so curiously wide-roofed, and curved, and turned, that they looked like demure old ladies in Dunstable bonnets ! You could almost fancy that, if you watched them long enough, they would curtsey to each other in the gloaming, or nod their heads in kindly good-night greeting. One or two of the more pretentious were girdled by a motto, like Low Cross Farm ; such as "God is our help," "God be with us," and the like ; almost all had window plants in shallow, projecting windows—fuchsias, geraniums, and gigantic petunias white and purple, the morning-glory, and pale azure periwinkle clambered over the doorways forming quite a floral archway for the passers in and out ; while on the thatched roof patches of stonecrop and clumps of deep green velvety moss gave a mellow harmony of colours. In the centre of the village was The Green. It had no other name than this simple statement of its existence, since—so Low Cross was fully convinced—no other green existed in the three kingdoms to compare with it. At its head stood "The Whimperdale Arms," a hostelry redeemed from the status of a mere village ale-house by the flowers that bloomed in its many window-boxes, and the low porch all covered with ivy and the crimson-berried rado-canthus, with its quaint old stone seats on either side.

In the centre of the green was a massive cross, its broad arms cunningly carved in stone, the steps at its base embossed by many a deep-hued lichen, the wheel in its centre perforated. At the foot of this cross night by night, for century after century, from the month of September on to Shrovetide, a blast had been blown on a mighty ox-horn at ten precisely of the night, so that Low Cross people were apt to say "at horn-blow," just as we say at "cock-crow," and in snowy winters, when the Yorkshire wolds were one unbroken sea of dazzling white, and each pine-tree in the woods bore its load of snow, it was said that many a wayfarer had been saved from cruel death by the clear, sharp blast of the great horn.

As you stood on the green you could see the chimneys of the farm among the larches, and, further away, quite in the

distance, the towers of Steadly Hall, the great house of the neighbourhood. The red gables of the Rectory, too, were discernible half-way up the hill towards the church.

All able-handed male Low Cross worked at the ironstone diggings that lay on the far side of the hills: consequently husbands, fathers, and sweethearts were wont to be more or less powdered with ochre-dust, like so many auricula blossoms. The women wore short skirts, loose, coloured cotton jackets, and big sun-bonnets, even the oldest female inhabitants going about like a Kate Greenaway girl seen through a magnifying glass. But these things were for week-day wear, of course. On Sundays these dames appeared in black beaver bonnets, with goffered caps of a whiteness to dazzle your eyes.

Of course Low Cross had its inevitable village shop, where chandlery, sweetstuff, and a sprinkling of stationery and drapery dwelt amicably side by side; but the proprietor of the establishment, secure in monopoly, never put himself out for anybody, and on one occasion, when Kate asked him if he had a stick of sealing-wax among his goods, he amused her not a little by replying :

“Weel, I doan’t rightly know; but I’ll speer aboot a bit, mum, and happen I’ll put my hand on one.”

The postal arrangements, too, were amusingly primitive. One morning the letters were unconscionably late because the postman “had the toothache”; on another occasion because his wife had had twins during the night. No one grumbled at these things. Such events would occur in the best regulated families, and must be put up with.

Indeed, all the livelong day Low Cross was a veritable “Sleepy Hollow,” and Kate thought that even the dogs yawned more persistently than in other places, each sitting on its own yellow-painted doorstep lazily snapping at the flies.

The great orchard-garden at the farm was a source of great delight to Kate, with its under-tangle of ragwort, columbine, hart’s-tongue, and the white-starred stellaria, and its gnarled and knotted apple-trees, their load of fruit ripening in the

August sun, while here and there a rosy-cheeked windfall lay shining among the grass.

"It's an audfarran'd place," said Matthew Goldstraw, full of pride, as well Kate could see, yet affecting a serene indifference ; "and sadly choked i' places with them dratted dockans ; but there's few apples i' all the country round can touch them Blenheims and Keswicks, that there bean't."

"Besides, Matthew," said Kate, with a smile that seemed to touch the old man's weatherbeaten face like sunshine ; "even the dock-leaves are useful, if one gets stung by a nettle."

"Ay, ay," admitted Matthew, with a reluctant air ; "if a body be fule enoo' to meddle wi' them so'art."

"We are stung sometimes whether we will or no," said Kate, with a sigh, and a far-away look in her eyes.

Never had Leah and Rachel been happier than in showing off all their most cherished possessions to Mrs. John. In the matter of attire they had mutually agreed from the first that there was nothing left for them to do but admire at a vast, an immeasurable distance ; but in the matter of birds and beasts and wild flowers, to say nothing of a store of household treasures, they felt they could hold their own. Even to each other they never spoke of their brother's wife as anything but "Mrs. John." To have called her "Kate" would have savoured of presumption and discourtesy. They followed her about ; were ardent to fetch and carry for her ; and were never so delighted as when John and Humbie, with guns and dogs, betook themselves to the moors that lay some miles to the north, only returning as the light died away and the day closed in (the "keen mare," as Matthew would observe, "as fresh as when she started") ; because on such occasions their brother's wife was left entirely to them, to be taken about here, there, and everywhere, except for that quiet hour which she spent daily with the helpless house-mother.

A day or two after that memorable home-coming when Kate

first saw Low Cross Farm, Leah and Rachel set up their first claim upon Kate's time and attention. They came, timidly enough, to her room, and suggested (or rather Leah suggested, while Rachel blushed and smiled in the background) that perhaps "Mrs. John" would like to see the "best parlour."

"There's mother's fire-screen too," put in Rachel, with an air of conviction that the last-named attraction must of necessity prove irresistible to anyone.

"I shall be glad to go and see everything," said Kate, smiling, and a sigh of intense happiness heaved the bosoms of the twins.

How much would they have to tell to their very particular friend, the postmaster's daughter, when this too delightful visit of their brother's London wife should be over!

They devoured her with their eyes. Rachel was overcome to think she had ever compared Miss Sweetapple to this paragon. But then, they had not then known what "ways" Mrs. John had with her, nor yet caught sight of that beautiful gown, all pink silk—the colour of the roses that looked in at the window—and black lace so fine it felt like so many cobwebs in your hand. They wished Mrs. John could put on that gown with its long, sweeping train, and walk up and down the meadow, while all Low Cross was peeping in through the rails and over the wide side-gate.

They felt so tall that they almost expected to see their frocks look indecently short. Though shod in good, broad-toed, substantial leather shoes, they seemed to tread on air. How often had they gazed—as the Peri gazed in at the gate of Heaven—at the great pew that had a little gallery all to itself in the recess opposite the pulpit and the "high" company from the Hall therein assembled, whose presence entirely prevented the Rector's wife from paying the slightest attention to her prayers!

Well, now people were going to gaze at them—or, rather, at this charming figure in their midst.

"She is not like us," Leah had whispered to her sister in the

retirement of the passage window-seat over-night.; "she is like the company they have at the Hall."

Of course there was no need to particularise who "she" was. The personal pronoun was quite descriptive enough. For Leah and Rachel there was no other "she" in the world than that lithe, girlish creature with the coronal of ruddy hair and the fearless, golden-brown eyes.

As beautiful and as simple as one of the wild flowers round their native homestead was the single-hearted devotion bestowed upon Kate by these honest country lassies. No leaven of jealousy, no speck of covetousness marred its perfection. Their own homely ways and simple dresses were not made in the least distasteful to them by this near vision of a creature so different to themselves.

They were proud, too, for John's sake. Had they not been proud of that clever brother of theirs all their lives? They did not think it at all strange that Kate had married him.

Anybody would, you know.

But they thought he had made a beautiful choice, and they told Humbie so in the meadow.

"We thought, just at first, you know, that she wouldn't care for things," they said; "the white calfy, and the kittens, and the fantails, and pouters——"

"Did you?" said Humbie; "I never did. I knew she would care for everything."

"Oh, Humbie;" they cried, "how clever you are!"

But the boy would not say any more. Humbie was in a dream.

He had often tried to fancy and picture to himself a fairy princess for John. Now the vision had come true, and she was more gentle and more winning than even this fancy of his had painted her.

He did not want to lose time in talking, there was so much to think about. True, there was a shadow on his joy; but he had not put it into words as yet, not even to his own heart.

Mother knew. Of this he was sure; but they had not

spoken of it together. Indeed, there was little need for the two—the mother and her boy—the boy who was “not just like other folk” to resort to words at any time. It seemed with them as if thought flashed from heart to heart like an electric current carrying light.

But we are letting the clock run on too fast, and must put the hands back a little, for we have left our trio too long on their way to the best parlour. On the one side of the wide flagged passage that ran all the length of the house at Low Cross were, as we already know, two rooms, leading the one from the other—the house-place, or summer sitting-room, and the kitchen with its great reckon and its shining walls, be-jewelled by all kinds of utensils that could be made to shine like mirrors. On the other side of the way was a single, long, rather narrow room, with a determinedly festive appearance that to some people was decidedly depressing. There were so many antimacassars about that it was a complete trap to the unwary, and you had to exercise some ingenuity not to leave the room bringing with you, adhering to some part of your toilette, one of these curious works of art; indeed, it was said that the Rev. Dionysius Sweetapple, M.A., Rector of Low Cross and private chaplain to Lord Whimperdale, had on one occasion walked almost the length of the village, with a structure in beads and what is called macrame thread depending from his reverend person by the behind button of his clerical coat. This, however, may be only a fable invented by the gossips of Low Cross in an hour of spleen.

Leah led the way, Kate followed, Rachel brought up the rear, straining eagerly forward to see what impression should be made upon Mrs. John by the sight of the “best parlour” and all its magnificence.

Leah opened the door, stepping back to give greater effect to the *coup d'œil*, and to allow the honoured guest to enter. As she did so, the eyes of both sisters were focussed on her face. She was different to themselves; she was like the company at the Hall; but it was hardly probable she could

have seen anything better, in its way, than this cherished room of theirs.

She looked quietly round ; she was quite calm.

" If you made all these"—hesitating for a word—" tidies yourselves, it must have taken you a long time," said Kate.

They were pleased at this, and told her how this person and that had given them new patterns, and shown them new stitches in both crochet and knitting.

" Do you crochet much ? " said Leah. " Miss Sweetapple told us it had rather gone out of fashion, but we could scarcely believe her, could we, Ray ? "

" No," replied Mrs. John ; " I am not clever at fancy work of that kind, but I have an aunt who knits."

" This is mother's screen," put in Rachel, showing some tact, it must be confessed, in turning to a fresh subject, and again the twins prepared to see their brother's wife astonished.

The fire-screen was enshrined in a real rose-wood frame, and was looked upon by the village collectively as a very sweet thing in fancy work. It represented a basket, outlined in gold beads and yellow braid ; and in this, stitched down to the canvas, was a group of artificial flowers, the tendrils of which were worked in green wool (chain stitch), and appeared to have no connection with anything, and to begin and end in a perfectly independent manner. There was a white camellia, and a rose that had once been red, but was now but a faded blotch.

Somewhat it came to Kate to think that the rose of the worker's life had faded in like manner, and that nothing was left but the pale reflection of what once had been.

She pictured a girl, young, buoyant, hopeful—a girl something like Leah, but with John's eyes—bending over the outstretched canvas, and feeling in her innocent heart something of an artist's pride as those wonderful tendrils grew beneath her hands ; and then she thought of the spirit-face upon the pillow upstairs, and the willing hands that would never more be active, but must lie folded and still like dead flowers.

How the "white wonder" of Kate's hand, shining with many rings, showed up as she laid it against the faded screen, like a dove's wing seen against a grey sky! How stately she was! How gently she moved, making no sound, yet lithe and active as a young deer! The twins exchanged glances; there was no one like her—no one.

How they longed for Sunday! Then she would put on her best—everyone did that, of course, on the seventh day of the week—and sit in their midst in the family pew, and even the Hall people in their own particular gallery would look down and think her a sight to see.

One or two samplers on the walls of the best parlour were examined, all the work of the house-mother in a day gone by, and all of the most moral and edifying nature, and then Leah whispered to Rachel:

"Would we show her the white calfy, do you think, Ray?"

So they did, first fetching down from her room the grey hat with those wonderful curling feathers, and watching her intently as she put it on before a round mirror, above which a gold eagle held up a gold chain, and which, from age, had acquired a misty surface that no mortal duster would clear.

It was delightful to find that Mrs. John took the deepest interest in the shaky-legged, goggle-eyed calf; in the four kittens with bushy tails; in the peacock, who strutted and lifted up his beautiful arch of feathers; even in the little rose-leaf-pink pigs, with tails like delicate tendrils, tumbling over one another in the golden straw. All at once Kate looked upwards, shading her eyes with her hand. There, on the top of the steep, steep hill, stood the square-towered church, a fane enshrined in the turquoise-blue sky.

"Could we go up there? There must be a lovely view," said Kate, and in a moment they were off up the winding, sandy lane, with its woodbine-laden hedges, and firs each wearing a crown of cones.

How lightly Kate walked even up the steepest parts of the way!

"A fine London lady" indeed! Don't tell them; they knew better, bless you, whatever Aunt Libbie might say.

They couldn't say these things out loud, Kate being there, but they looked at each other across her (of course, they were one on each side of her), and understood without words.

"We will go to the churchyard," said Rachel, taking the lead naturally, as the eldest by half an hour.

So to the churchyard they went; and then Kate found that in this, as in many other matters, distance had lent enchantment to the view.

The shadow of the Methodism planted by Whitfield and Wesley in those northern shires was still brooding over Low Cross, and its churchyard had none of that beauty which one loves to see associated with the resting-place of the dead.

Sheep grazed here and there, kneeling to graze as almost seeming to know they were in the shadow of God's house. The grass grew rank and strong, and was varied by heaps of clay and sod, which offended the eye of the beholder.

The gravestones were lolling about at every possible angle, suggestive of neglect and decay, and sprang from beds of nettles and weeds in which no floweret, even the most humble, cared to blow.

Across this dreary wilderness the twins led poor Kate, until they brought her to what was apparently the family place of sepulture, a flat erection like a dressing-table with a stone.

"Aunt Phœbe, Uncle Toser, and three of us who died quite little. Shoo!"

This last adjuration was not, as might have been supposed, addressed to the manes of the departed, but to an old and decrepit donkey, which, with its front feet hobbled to prevent it straying, came staggering towards the group at the tomb-stone.

"Poor soul!" said Kate pityingly. "I should think they need hardly tie its legs to prevent it roaming at its own sweet will; why, it has enough to do to stand. What a shame to have it stumbling about among the graves like that!"

"Do you think so?" said Ray, amazed. "The grazing is let out."

Hot, impulsive Kate was about to break out into expressions of the strongest disapproval, but curbed herself in time. After all, it was not her place to set all Low Cross right, and frighten the twins by a—to them—mysterious indignation. Even the sorrow and trials of the last few days had taught her something—just the initial letter, one may say, of the art of self-discipline.

"All our people are buried here," said Leah, laying her hand upon the flat, moss-grown stone.

"So I see," said Kate, unable to control a shiver as she glanced at the tossed, uneven turf beneath the slab; "so I see."

"When Uncle Toser was buried all the village came to see," said Ray. "I don't believe there was a creature left down below. You were hard put to it to get round them, they crowded in such a throng—they were thick as porri-wiggles in the pond by the meadow. There wasn't such a botherment in Low Cross for years back."

Leah was watching Kate.

"Has'na John told you all about Uncle Toser?" she said at last, coming close up to her.

What would not Kate have given to have kept back the rich red flood that dyed her cheek crimson at the girl's innocent questioning?

She had not been a wife even four short weeks without learning instinctively that a wife's first duty is to shield the weakness or misdeeds of her husband—that she should be as armour to him against the world, and at times against himself; but the stab of consciousness, the swift pang of remembering how little in truth had John told her about anything, drove the blood from her heart to her face—brought, too, the tears to her bright eyes.

"Have you stung yourself wi' the nettles?" cried Leah; "they're needing to be cut down, sure enough; or happen the hill was too brant for her, Ray?"

Kate sat down on the flat tombstone.

"I am out of breath," said poor Kate, with a flitting smile, glad to see they had already forgotten their question. "I will rest here a little, while you tell me about Uncle Toser."

They both began together.

"He was a very clever man——"

But Kate laughed, and held up her finger.

"One at a time," she said. "One at a time."

So Ray took up the tale, incited thereto by a gesture from Leah.

"He was a very clever man was Uncle Toser. Father says he used to walk about with his head among the stars."

"His head among the stars!" echoed Kate, amazed.
"What was he? Was he an astronomer?"

"Yes, that's it," continued Ray, eagerly; "and he knew every star in the sky; he could read it the same as one can read a book, and knew what it said. He used to look through a great spy-glass, and you'd hear him say to himself: 'Wonderful! wonderful—it's past all telling.' He took to John amazin', and said he'd a vast mind for books, and was a promisin' lad, and no mistake, and all suchlike sayin's. Uncle Toser was thought a lot on by all the country round, he was such a clever man. He lived with father and mother at the farm, and he took great note on us children—every one of us, but he was counted close-neaved, and not one to put much in the collectin' plate on Sundays. Well, when Humbie was a bit baby with no name to him, Uncle Toser took dreadful bad, and he said, bein' as he was so bad, they might humour him a little and call the baby Humboldt. Father wasn't over willin'; he thought it carried such a heathen kind o' sound; but Uncle Toser set his mind to have it so, and said that a man named that way wrote mighty fine words, and read the sky and all the stars like an open book, and he'd like for Humbie to grow up a star-gazer same fashion, and happen the name would do something towards it. He said John was a likely lad, and he'd done his duty by him, but he'd no

mind for star-gazing, and maybe Humbie would take on that way——”

At this point in the family history Ray stopped, and Leah, eager to have her say, took up the broken thread.

“ Uncle Toser died when Humbie was only a week christened, and then they found he hadn’t been close-neaved for nothing, for he left a vast of money, and put it down on paper, and had it signed by Mr. Sweetapple and the head gamekeeper at the Hall, and all that money was to be for John. It was wrote down like this : ‘To be for my nephew John, to give him all sorts o’ learnin’ and to make a gentleman of him.’ Why, Ray—Ray ! she’s lost her breath again,” and Leah caught Kate’s hand and hugged it up to her bosom.

How white she was ! How strange her eyes looked, just as if they could see nothing nearer than the moorland, on which the westering sun lay sleeping, and which looked like a purple haze in the far, far distance.

There was a soft rush through the tall grass, a whimper of delight, and Jack had his two tawny paws on Kate’s lap, and was audaciously trying his best to lick her pale cheek with his rose-red tongue.

“ Down, sir—down ! ” cried a voice from the lych-gate, and then Humbie came up to them, and stood there, looking gravely down at his brother’s wife.

“ We were telling her about Uncle Toser,” said Leah, “ and how he left all his money . . . ”

“ Yes, yes,” said Humbie, a flushing rising hotly to his brow ; “ you have been chattering away until you have tired her out. Run home, both of you ; mother will be wondering how you came to be out so long, and neither of you going nigh her.”

With one pouting, regretful look at Kate they were gone. Then there was silence awhile in the churchyard, save for the short, blundering steps of the hobbled donkey, and the weird cry of some shrikes as they rose and fell, and rose again against the amber sky.

Kate's hand was held close and fast in the long, lithe fingers that could with surpassing cunning "discourse such excellent music" from the violin.

Both her eyes and Humbie's were fixed upon the fair distant scene that lay outspread at their feet. The gold and the purple were dying to soft blues and tender greys. Field and tree and moorland seemed to be seen through an exquisite veil, and from the edge of this rose a faint moon-face, with one attendant star glittering like a jewel.

"How peaceful it looks, does it not, Sister Kate?" said Humbie, trembling with his own temerity.

"Yes," she answered slowly; "but so far, so very far away. What was it that Leah read to your mother for her evening chapter the night I came? 'Peace I leave you, my peace I give unto you.'"

And Humbie added, speaking very soft and low:
"Not as the world giveth give I unto you.' It is often across the stormy sea one is led to the haven where one would be. I thought once that I could not bear my—my being not like other folk; but I've got to love it now; it's opened so many hearts to me."

Then they went home, walking slowly, and keeping silence.

CHAPTER VI.

AUNT LIBBIE FEELS AGGRIEVED.

IT has been said that the true, beautiful, and picturesque side of life at Low Cross Farm had been readily grasped and realised by John Granger's young wife ; more than this, that her sympathies had gone out towards the helpless house-mother, to Humbie, and, in a certain way, to Thomas Granger himself ; while, as to Leah and Rachel, what heart—unless it were all as hard as the nether millstone—could have been callous to their single-hearted devotion ? Assuredly not Kate's. True, Miss Libbie occupied a self-chosen position towards the young bride, that made warmth either of sympathy or manner impossible.

Miss Libbie believed herself to be in possession not only of one, but of many grievances against the new comer. For one thing, John had never told her (Aunt Libbie) enough about his intended bride. If he had written a wholly confidential letter to her, explaining that the lady whom he was about to marry was "like the company at the Hall", if he had foreseen difficulties, and besought her (Aunt Libbie) to stand by him in these difficulties, things would have worn a different aspect. But he had not done these things. The silver-grey dress, the curling feathers, the dainty speech of the bride, had been a shock to Aunt Libbie. She had, upon the instant, jumped to the conclusion that Kate, despising everyone in her heart, wanted to give herself airs generally, and had taken up her own stand accordingly in opposition.

"I am quite prepared," she had said, with a toss of her head that almost unshipped the solitary hairpin—"I am quite prepared for brother to say he's set on Mrs. John sitting ahint the tea-tray."

"Oh," cried Ray, "she would never think of such a thing—would she, Leah? even if father did."

This only made matters worse.

"You all sing the same song," said Miss Libbie. "You can't see no wrong in her any way, just because she's a fine lady. I hate such ways."

This denunciation was vague enough to hold some terror for the twins, accustomed to Miss Libbie's rule from their toddling infancy.

They stole away to the privacy of their own little chamber under the tiles, where the dormer window was garlanded with flame-coloured nasturtiums, and a lily stood on the ledge. Ray cried, but Leah said she "didn't care," and called Miss Libbie "a jealous old thing!"

The same evening Miss Libbie's sentiments were still further made plain to the family.

Jack, to his unspeakable pride and joy, had been given a little satin-lined reticule of Kate's to carry. With head high in the air, and tail gently swirling, he stepped as delicately and mincingly along the meadow as could Agag when he came to Samuel; and the farmer, simmering in restful content with his pipe, and Miss Libbie, occupied with a remarkably obstinate hole in the heel of one of Humbie's socks, watched his antics from the window of the house-place.

Suddenly the tawny ears were pricked, the tail lifted like a pennon, a twinkle of fun shone in the golden-brown eyes, and Jack was off at a canter, pursued by a flying figure all in shimmering cream-colour, with a red, red rose nestling by a round white throat—in a word, by Kate, laughing, chasing the runaway, and looking back over her shoulder every now and again at John and Humbie, who both devoured with

adoring eyes this new Atalanta. A beautifully formed woman never looks so well as when—untrammeled by undue constriction in her dress—she runs lightly and easily, calling into play all the artistic curves and lines of limb and shoulder.

Down to the edge of the larch-wood, back again, round the corner of the house went the chase, the farmer laying down his pipe to watch the contest, the broadest of broad smiles upon his ruddy face.

"Yon's a bonnie sight!" he said. "She's a bonnie lass is John's wife, and no mistake on't, and none the worse for coming fro' London town that I can see. She's slape as a lapwing skimmin' over the grass, that she be."

"A lapwing indeed!" said Miss Libbie; "a nice kind of thing to compare a respectable married woman to. When I was a girl such things were very different. You never saw Susan take to such unbecomin' ways, she knew better, and wore her hair under a decent cap, not stuck all atop of her head twisted like a hayband, and bits o' curls dropping all about her face."

"Tut—tut!" said the farmer; "it's a long while back, Libbie, sin' you were a gurl, and the world hasn't stood still, mind you. Let-a-be—let-a-be; let 'un run—why shouldn't her? Hoo's never be younger. It's t' fashion o' young things to skip; why, i' David's time even t' little hills took a turn that way, it seems, now and again; though I must say it's a bit of a botherment to know how they set about it, and what the farmers in those parts thought o' their new-set fields bein' so lively. As to Susan—dang it all, Libbie! you've a gift for touching the raw as I never saw ekalled by man or woman, and that's a strong sayin', my lass. Wouldn't I give every ear o' corn i' every stack, and every blessed head o' live stock on the place, to see my poor girl run any kind o' way, or tak' a few steps either, were they never so stumblin'-like? Her poaty feet is still enoo, God knows! still enoo—still enoo. Poor lass!"

Do we make allowance enough for the troubles of disagreeable people?

I trow not.

It is so easy to sympathise with the trials of those who are charming and interesting, and have the gift of glossing over even their wrong-doings till they shine with a sort of delusive lustre ; but for the hard-featured, hard-spoken sinner or sufferer, sympathy is a more difficult commodity to reach out and grasp.

Aunt Libbie had a store of sterling qualities and resolute energy that might have set up several respectable females with quite an abundant store. She had "kept house" at Low Cross Farm for many thrifty years ; she had patched and mended, saved and managed, and, in her heart of hearts dearly loving her brother and his practically motherless little ones, had set herself the task of filling the vacant place to the best of her light. But her tongue was an unruly member, it must sting, and at times the family felt as though they were living in a hornet's nest. That there was honey stored away somewhere all the while, it was hard for them to remember.

And now, in her old age, after more than sixteen years of early rising and late taking rest, she found herself—or fancied she found herself, which was just the same thing in point of the suffering of it—set aside by a chit of a thing with her hair all heaped on the top of her head, and shoes with heels that made a tap, tap, tap on the flagged floors as she went along.

It was wonderful what a relief it was to Miss Libbie to think of Kate as a "chit." She would have liked to speak of her by that term to Susan. But there was something in Susan's face when she spoke of "John's wife" which made that impossible.

Certainly there was some excuse to be made for John and Humbie. John was blind ; it was a way with lovers and newly-married husbands—they soon got over it, though.

Humbie was but a boy, and a bit of a fly-by-night, full of dreams and fancies, as might, indeed, be expected of

one who had been called after a man who had, from all accounts, spent his life in looking through a big spy-glass at the moon and stars, instead of being content to know what the Bible told him about them. It was all very well to till the earth and gather the fruit thereof, because that was useful ; but what better was a man for meddling with the stars ? They were made to light the earth at night-time, and did their work very well when there were no clouds, if only people would leave them alone, and let them do their shining undisturbed.

Miss Libbie was the only one at Low Cross who had no veneration for the family oracle, Uncle Toser. She had expressed her opinion pretty plainly as to the advisability of calling an innocent baby by a heathenish, outlandish name. She had been overruled. She was often overruled. She was being overruled, stamped upon, made little of now, by this Kate-fever that had set in at the farm.

So the tears threatened to rise, and she saw the meadow and the larch wood through a mist. The tear that gathers in the sunken eye and trickles down the furrowed cheek may tell of as keen a heart pang as the pearl that bedews the lovely upturned gaze of youth and beauty ; but few of us remember this ; and since to Aunt Libbie's hard-lined features, the effort to restrain emotion only imparted a more fractious and peevish appearance, the farmer became resentful.

"It's like this, Libbie," he said, tapping the end of his pipe on the table to give due emphasis to his words : "you canna see a bonnie lass wi'out wanting to pick holes in her. You've reared up John from a kid, and you canna abear to see as he loves the ground yon wife of his sets her pretty foot on. You used to be same wi' Susan when she and I were first wed. You're like sommat as has gone sour wi' keepin', and makes folks' tongues rough and raspy."

All the muscles of Miss Libbie's throat and round her mouth began to stand out like strings run tight. Prudence fled to the winds, and, by a sad mischance, just at that

moment Kate's laugh, sweet and soft as the rippling song of a thrush at sundown, rang out on the still evening air, no doubt at some new freak of Jack's.

Miss Libbie did not like the sound. She was in a mind to think Mrs. John laughed purposely at a critical juncture, so unreasonable will anger make us at times.

"She laughs too frivolous for a grown woman. Hark at her!" she said.

"Too frivolous! I love to hearken 'till her," answered the farmer. "She's same as the birds i' the woods i' springtime. She's but a young creature; let her have her day—let her have her day. It comes bo' once to all on us."

"She's just a silly slip of a girl," continued Miss Libbie. "I doubt me if she'd know when a potato's fit for dishin' by the fork, or ever mixed a battling cake in her life! Why, brother, you could 'most span her in your two hands about the middle."

"Ay, that could I," said the farmer, making a circle with his mighty hands—"that could I."

"But you know, Aunt Libbie," said Humbie, who had come in unawares, "it isn't the biggest apples that are the sweetest; is it now?"

Mr. Granger cast a half-apprehensive glance at his son. Was it possible that Uncle Toser's prophecies were about to come true? Was the boy about to become a poet, a star-gazer, a dreamer?

Truly that saying about the apples looked like it. It had a ring like the book of verses he used to learn out of when a boy at the village dame-school. He was opening his mouth to speak when Miss Libbie cut in:

"I know nothing more than this, that a pretty doll's face makes fools of the lot of you—young and old; and, as they say, there's no——"

"Fool like an old fool—eh?" put in Thomas Granger, chuckling. "Dang it a', Libbie, thou'rt in the right of it this time. I reckon the ol's place here hasna bin the same

sin' that there bonnie bird came singing round. As for fools, why, t' biggest I ever heerd on wur King Solomon i' the olden times, and we've all took after 'un; it's t' way on us, and we'll never mend, my lass, long as t' world stands—not we! A smack o' the rosy lips, a glink o' the bright eyes—that's us, and no mistake. Why, I mind times when I'd walk miles and miles through slush and mire just to ketch a glimpse o' Humbie's mother there, and see her stand bashful-like, and wi' her pretty fingers teasing her apron-string, by her father's door t' watch me out into the night. Ay, ay, but she wur a sweet slip o' a gurl when I married her—that wur she. I mind t' first day our banns wur put up, she blushed red as a poppy, and I squeedged her hand and made her redder still. Ah, poor lass! poor lass! she wur like t' poppies, prattiest i' bud, wur Susan."

Worse and worse grew things with Miss Libbie. Perhaps, in her heart of hearts, she had never quite forgiven her brother's wife for being a life-long invalid. To her mind the only proof a man or woman could give of being really ill was to die.

Then the spectators felt that there was no mere fancy or weak yielding about the matter. Then you were able to excuse that general inability to see after things which had formerly appeared somewhat unjustifiable. You said : "Ah yes. Poor So-and-so! it was a sad business."

You wouldn't have pitied So-and-so with such a willing mind if it had not been for that last act of the drama in which he or she played the principal part, and played it so thoroughly. Miss Libbie had been hard and unsympathetic to her brother's wife when those first bitter days of helplessness and pain came like a blight upon the house-mother. She did not say much, but the little jerk with which she would set down a cup or a tray said a good deal for her. God only knew what the sweet, meek soul of Susan Granger suffered ; God only saw the shining tear steal down the pale cheek in the silent watches of the night, and heard

the quivering sigh, that was in itself a wordless prayer. But Miss Libbie's actions had been better than her thoughts or her words. She had, to use her own expression, "toiled and moiled" for Thomas and the children morning, noon, and night. She had eaten the bread of carefulness, and seen that others fed on the same viand. She had slapped the girls when they were wilful or tore their clothes, nursed them when they were ill, and made them feel that by being ill they broke the eleventh, unwritten commandment. She had kept the servants and the men on the farm in order, and ruled everyone, except the farmer himself, right royally and rigidly.

The children had grown up to look to "Aunt Libbie" for everything; but all the sweetness of their lives was garnered up in "mother's room"; all their tenderness was reserved for the loving face on the pillow, the wan, worn hand that touched their sunny locks so lovingly; all the music of their lives lay in the low, soft voice that had ever a word of comfort and of cheer, that spoke so seldom of sleepless nights and suffering days, so often of each and every little trouble that came to any one of them.

No one had ever put all these things into words to Miss Libbie; but it does not need for anyone to tell us that grey clouds have drifted over the blue. We feel the lack of sunshine. We shiver at the chill breeze that makes the aspen quiver overhead. There was a softer kernel in Aunt Libbie's heart than anyone had yet suspected. No hand had ever touched it, but it was there.

She was conscious of something aching within her as her brother spoke. All the toiling and moiling of the long years seemed to be counted as nothing. Susan—poor, helpless, feckless Susan—held the stronghold of their hearts, and now a pigeon-voiced girl, with heels that went click-clack, and hands that looked as if they couldn't turn a twopenny cake on the griddle for love or money, must needs marry John, and come to turn the old place upside down, and the men's heads with it! It certainly was hard on Miss Libbie.

All these things happened on the Saturday evening, the last day of a week that, despite its initial stab, had not been all pain to Bonnie Kate.

Beside the growing attraction of certain sides of the rural life and household surrounding her, there had been sunshine from without. News from the dear travellers had been bright and hopeful. Aunt Cynthia already wrote as though the General's illness were a thing of the past. Will wrote more guardedly, but still spoke of improvement and added strength and energy from complete change of scene and place. It was also reported Mrs. Dulcimer had written in the highest terms of the qualities displayed by Chloe in the character of a watch-dog. "Dulcimer is not in the least nervous at nights now," wrote Aunt Cynthia, "which almost reconciles us to being without the sweet pet, whose pretty and engaging ways we miss at every turn."

If the tears were ready to rise between herself and the paper, as Kate read these home-records, she drove them bravely back. She was striving her utmost to rise above the pain of that first amaze—the first realisation of the reality of things; not the reality of her husband's social standing—she would have been but a poor creature to have let that come between her love and her—but the fact that in his character there existed a ring of weakness that had prevented—and might still further prevent—perfect trust and confidence. There is no keener suffering to a woman than the knowledge that the man she passionately loves fails to attain to her cherished ideal of him; and to a proud, undisciplined nature like Kate's such suffering was peculiarly severe. Yet John was loving, chivalrous, sympathetic, and ever by her side. She could not choose but be happy with such sweet store of joy at hand. As for the wound, she had covered it. It was not healed, only hidden, and at times it smarted, but she was resolved it should not steal her happiness away, nor yet embitter it.

Looking back upon the week at Low Cross Farm, it seemed

a year, for time goes by feeling more than by the clock. How much she had learned of a side of life that had hitherto been a sealed book to her ! The life and hopes, the ambitions and trials, of a world of which she had so far known but the mere shell, had all been revealed to her. She began to find herself looking at the weather as a deep subject of interest, not in the conventional way of a matter easy to dilate upon, but in its relation to the crops and fruits of the earth. Cows connected themselves in her mind with dairy produce. Eggs and butter were no longer mere adjuncts to a civilised breakfast, but things to be packed in vast "wickers," sent to market, and made profit on.

Kate had trimmed some simple, wide-brimmed hats for the twins with cunningly-devised white tulle flutings and tiny New Bond Street rosebuds, mocking Nature, and straight-way for Leah and Rachel the millennium had come, while they longed, with an exceeding great longing, for Sunday to follow suit, in order that they might display their treasures at church, the only available arena, since, as it happened, no fair was "on," at any adjacent village.

Tout vient à lui qui sait attendre, and time brought the dawning on which the twins opened happy eyes, remembering that hats and rosebuds would that day astonish Low Cross not a little, and their darling "Mrs. John" be seen and wondered at by the assembled congregation. Leah clapped her hands as she lifted her ruffled red head from the pillow. Ray pulled aside the blind. The sun shone through the dormer window, trickling in waves of light through the nasturtium leaves ; pigeons cooed on the comb of the thatch above ; swallows twittered just a little below.

Kate, too, was up betimes.

The royal morning gave her royal greeting. She sat at the open window in the wide, low window seat, putting the roses back with her hand, and leaning out to look over the meadow and into the farmyard beyond.

There was Leah, neat and complete in a gown of pale lilac

cotton that fitted her untrammelled figure with a simple grace, bearing a wide shallow dish in her hands. The water in the dish quivered and sparkled as she set it on the stones. Then she threw back her ruddy head, and gave a low, prolonged call, "Coo—ee! coo—ee!" and straightway came the wafting of wings, as pigeons white and pigeons blue, pigeons whose tails were fans for fairies, pigeons who appeared to be suffering from goitre and to be proud of the fact, pigeons all dappled red-brown, and undertaker pigeons all deepest indigo with rings of turquoise round their eyes, lighted soft as snow-flakes everywhere, perching on the sides of the great china-lined bowl, dropping into it, struggling in it, diving one over the other with swift pulsation of wings and dipping of sleek necks, till the water flew this way and that in broken shafts of light, and you could see no bowl at all, only a mass of ruffled, rustling feathers and glittering dew-drops.

"What a pretty sight!" said Kate, and the twins, looking up, thought that Kate herself, framed in the rose-wreathed casement, was also a pretty sight.

They came quickly through the yard gate and on to the smooth green sward. They came close, close under the window.

"Is John there?"

"Yes; he hasn't finished dressing."

"Well,—whisper."

Kate leaned further out, and the two, speaking as one girl, put a momentous question:

"What are you going to wear at church?"

Before she could reply Ray added an item of news on her own account.

"Rogers says"—Rogers was the head man on the farm—"that Lord Whimperdale came down to the Hall last night, and has brought two ladies and a gentleman with him."

The association of ideas gave Kate a sharp sting.

She was to put on her best bonnet because Lord Whimperdale had seen fit to come to the Hall, and bring two ladies and a "gentleman" (odious word applied in such fashion!) with him. She drew in her head quickly, conscious of a hot flush mounting to the very parting of her hair.

John's arm was round her in a moment.

"Don't let their chatter vex you, darling," he said, kissing her flushed cheek tenderly. "They are but silly girls, and mean no harm."

"They are dear, and good, and true ; it is not that."

She did not say : "It is the false position in which I find myself. I am expected to make a good show before people whose equal I have always been, and it is natural that such a thing should hurt."

She only turned aside with the little graceful gesture of hands that he knew so well—a gesture that meant the subject under discussion was put away into the limbo of silence.

Meanwhile the twins had caught a glimpse of John's dark head at the window, and scuttled off, knowing full well they had been indiscreet.

It seemed to them a long while to church-time—to Kate, but a span. In vain the beauty of the day wooed her ; in vain the three sweet-voiced bells dropped from the church in the sky ; in vain even Jack's pathetic eyes sought her sympathy for the pitiful fact that the family were preparing to go whither he could not follow them.

Full well he knew that those dropping bells, if they called the rest to go, meant that he must stay at home, for never would Jack face the humiliation of going up the winding hill and being sent back home in the face of the gathering congregation. He would far sooner stay at home and harry the peacock by barking at him, and making short runs at him when he put his tail up and stamped with his feet ; or lift Nip, the little black cat, by his head, and trail him round

the meadow, by way of passing the time away and taking it out of somebody.

But Jack was not always perverse. There was a room at Low Cross Farm where it was always Sunday ; where a Sabbath calm ever brooded, and a gentle hand was always ready to touch his tawny head lovingly. Thither would Jack wend his way, lying all of a heap on the rug beside Mrs. Granger's bed until footsteps and voices below made him prick up his ears and give a short, sharp bark that meant welcome.

Though they were conscious of indiscretion in the morning, nothing could control the curiosity of the twins as to Kate's attire as the important hour drew near.

They were lurking in the house-place to peer at her as she came downstairs. They looked guilty but radiant.

Only for a moment though. The next they had turned towards one another almost with a moan.

There was absolutely nothing to see after all their watching —only the grey dress they had seen so often, a bit of queer-looking, yellowish lace wrapped round the throat, with a pale pink rose plucked from the window at one side, and, instead of the hat with its curled feathers, a little snood-like bonnet to match the dress, fitting the dainty head as a calyx fits the flower.

"Did you ever?" said Leah's eyes to Ray's, and Ray's answered back : "No, I never!"

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. SWEETAPPLE.

IN the knee-breeches and velvety corduroy coat of week-days, Thomas Granger was a notable and picturesque figure. The broadcloth of Sunday wear took all the charm out of him. It bagged at the shoulders and wrinkled at the back, and in it he was uncomfortable and ill at ease. Walking between him and John up the winding road to the church, Kate felt these things to be so. The twins lagged behind, nursing a sense of injury at Mrs. John's lack of expected smartness. They found some consolation, it is true, in the tulle pleatings and rosebuds—foreseeing the complete downfall and overthrow of the postmaster's daughter—but Kate was too dear an object of worship for her shortcomings not to overshadow even so great a joy.

Aunt Libbie brought up the rear, attended by Humbie, who always carried her large, brown-backed prayer-book, and the umbrella, without which she never left the farm, hail, rain, or shine.

They were early arrivals, and well settled in a big square pew just under the reading-desk, before the "quality," as Aunt Libbie had called them at breakfast, put in an appearance, an event that occurred only just previous to the Rev. Dionysius Sweetapple emerging from the vestry in a procession of one, heralded by the rather wheezy notes of a harmonium, played by Miss Sweetapple herself.

Kate sat in the corner of honour, motioned thereto by

the farmer—the corner where poor Susan had appeared as a bride, blushing and bashful, in a white Dunstable bonnet and white silk gloves, with a sprig of rosemary in her neatly-folded kerchief, many a long year ago.

No one could be more unconscious than Kate that by sitting where she was desired to sit she had planted another arrow in Miss Libbie's virgin breast. The farmer, however, was wide awake to the fact, and repeated the responses in a defiant and determined manner that made the twins look with round eyes from beneath their rosebud hats.

Indeed, Kate had enough to do to fight with a growing sense of discomfort on her own part, and not even the rustic cheek of the bride Susan had flickered more from pale to pink, and pink to pale, than hers.

It was gradually dawning upon her that she was the centre, not only of interest, but of a curiosity painful in its intensity; conscious that dames and yokels in the free seats that ran the complete length of the church, and more pretentious Low Cross from sheep-pen-like pews on this hand and on that, cast furtive glances, or openly gaped and stared, according to their lights in the matter of manners.

A lady with a high nose and long upper lip, and a bonnet that all the flowers of the field had apparently combined to decorate, and whose wiry form was draped in that most lamentable female garment yclept a dolman, seemed wholly unable to chain her attention to her prayer-book. She had a pew all to herself, and every now and then glared at the choir (who surrounded Miss Sweetapple, as bees cluster about their queen), as an excuse to give Kate a good round stare *en passant*.

Leah bent forward on pretence of giving Mrs. John a hymn-book. "Mrs. Sweetapple," she said in a pig's whisper. Ray twitched her sister's sleeve. She saw that Kate was not caring for such information, and doubtless thought Leah was behaving badly in church.

Sitting there with the blinding sunshine playing hide-and-

seek through the dulled green, lattice-paned windows, with birds chirping out among the gravestones, and the wheezy harmonium giving forth spasmodic blasts that died away with a startling suddenness quite unattainable by any other description of instrument : and with the farmer breathing heavily, uneasily, and John beside her grave and troubled, Kate felt as if life were indeed pressing heavily down on her young head ; felt, in truth, much in the position of the man to whom we are told the grasshopper is a burden. Miss Libbie's Sunday bonnet may have been said to represent that insect not inaptly, with its large, pale apple-green bows like wings on either side, and its strangling strings tied unnaturally tight, as though to prevent it flying away. Brown thread gloves had suggested themselves to Miss Libbie as a chaste and suitable adjunct to this marvellous headgear, and, it is needless to say, were an added trial to Kate, more especially when they grated against the leaves of the big prayer-book, and set her teeth on edge. The heat and burden of the day may oppress us, but it is the sting of the gnat that seems the hardest thing to bear.

As the service went on, the attention of the Rector visibly wandered from his book to the strange lamb of his flock ; a weakness atoned for by an angry shove to his spectacles, and a gruffer appeal to the Almighty to forgive the sins of himself and the congregation in general.

In the pew in the gallery that had a niche all to itself, Kate, in common with all Low Cross, had the satisfaction of seeing Lord Whimperdale. He still retained the erect carriage of a guardsman, and the long, sweeping cavalry moustache was snow white. His cast of feature was that typified by the hawk or eagle, if you could imagine either bird with a glass in one eye, and its head feathers cropped close.

Lord Whimperdale scanned the congregation a moment with this eye-glass, as though casually to ascertain whether all his tenants were present, and then, as if by accident,

allowed himself to focus for a moment the slight figure in grey in the corner of Farmer Granger's pew, ere, with a skilful movement of the muscles round the eye, he dropped the glass into his hand. Seizing a convenient moment he whispered a word or two to his gentle-faced wife, and she, noting that Kate's eyes were cast down, looked long—one would almost have said tenderly—at the girl-wife.

Assuredly some pity lay in the depths of the tender, motherly face of Lady Whimperdale; a look familiar enough even in the humblest cottage in Low Cross, whenever sorrow or suffering crossed the threshold.

The two women and one man whose advent at the Hall had already been heralded at sunrise by Leah, were such pleasant, refined-looking folk as Kate had been in the habit of seeing day by day in the Row, or on the river, or of meeting at "at homes" or dinners ; well-dressed people with a distinct yet quiet air of fashion ; the man looking as if he had just sauntered down New Bond Street or Piccadilly, and might be expected to call a hansom from sheer forgetfulness when he got outside the lych-gate.

It was strange the thrill and the exaggerated idea of the passage of time which the sight of these people gave to Kate. They seemed a part of the old life from which she had travelled so far. True, John was quite as well-bred-looking and twice as good-looking as the stranger. The surroundings of the farm-house life had appeared quite as incongruous for him at first as for herself. Then the beauty of some aspects of it had laid hold of her, and the jar and discord had dwindled. Now she was brought, as it were, face to face in an entirely new and false position, with those hitherto her own equals and associates. She thought how these people would be discussed at the mid-day dinner ; how every item of their attire and demeanour would be commented upon with the greatest gusto by the twins, and with reluctant enjoyment by Miss Libbie ; how the farmer would chuckle over the "lasses" being so taken up with the

grand company at the Hall ; how Humbie would keep silence, and John would writhe under the fire of words he could not still, since no one would have the remotest idea why he should wish to do so.

She had been so bright and happy all the week—that was, after the first crisis ; she had grown to know and love “John’s people” just as they were—not as they looked when brought into juxtaposition with the world to which she herself belonged. Unconsciously Kate raised her eyes and looked with a strange pathetic wistfulness at Lady Whimperdale. There was something about her that reminded her of Aunt Cynthia : a certain fall of the shoulders under the black-lace cloak that showed glints of lavender here and there, and in the simple black-lace bonnet with its aigrette of lavender ostrich-tips. But Lady Whimperdale’s face was stronger than Aunt Cynthia’s ; the dark, straight brows, and calm, observant eyes looking out from under bands of soft, white crimped hair, made it beautiful to look upon. It was a face to trust, as well as to love and cherish as something sweet and precious.

When the Rector’s discourse was at an end, and the wheezy harmonium was haltingly and fitfully breathing out a sacred march, to the sound of which the congregation stepped briskly out into the sunshine, Lady Whimperdale looked back at the square pew below as she turned to follow her guests. Kate, by a strange coincidence, looked up at the same moment, and a strange feeling came over her as of having recognised a friend, though nowhere in this world had she met those calm, soft eyes before.

Mrs. Sweetapple was wont to thank her stars emphatically and often that she had “no nonsense about her.” Whether her friends were equally grateful for this fact is doubtful, since, being interpreted, it meant that she gave thanks to Heaven in that she possessed less delicacy and refinement than her neighbours, and had none of that dread of hurting other people’s feelings that is one of the saving restraints of civilised life.

She was a woman who not only put her foot down when she wanted to get her own way, but did not care what she trampled upon in the process. It may be said that she made a regular door-mat of her husband in this respect, contradicting him almost every time he opened his mouth, her only regret being that this was impossible on Sundays during sermon time. Then the Rector had to have his say, *coute que coute*, and people were unkind enough to say that he occasionally cast defiant glances down from the proud eminence of the high three-decker, under which Mrs. Sweetapple grew restless and red.

The people of Low Cross dreaded Mrs. Sweetapple unspeakably, and never said they were ill, if they could help it, when she came on her visiting rounds, since she always set herself to prove to them that their ailments were the result of pure perversity, and only continued through obstinate mismanagement. This was not a cheering attitude to take towards the sick poor ; but Mrs. Sweetapple prided herself upon it as tending to prove the fact that she had " no nonsense about her."

But even the mightiest are vulnerable in one spot. Mrs. Sweetapple could turn, and twist, and manage everyone except her own daughter. Melissa was too much for her. Melissa baffled her. Melissa had about as much appreciation of the fifth commandment as a young rook ; was candid and outspoken to a fault ; and was looked upon as a natural curiosity by the simple-minded peasantry and toilers in the yellow ironstone pits. They would be coming home all powdery with ironstone, and stand with open mouth and eyes to see her pass.

" Bean't she now ? " they would say ; a remark that left much to the imagination, yet appeared to convey a great deal to the hearer ; " an' doan't she manage t' oud ooman neither ? " a concluding phrase that it was well Mrs. Sweetapple did not hear, or she might have had a fit of some sort on the spot.

Melissa was given to bright clothing, and it became her as a gorgeous plumage becomes a bird, for she was tall and slight, with a thin, aquiline face, and large dark, near-sighted eyes, which she had an odd manner of shutting when she spoke, as if the light were too strong for them. It saved her a great deal of trouble, this same trick of hers, enabling her to ignore many things that it might have been inconvenient to recognise.

To watch Mrs. Sweetapple and her daughter when together was to be irresistibly reminded of a hen who has hatched a duckling, and is ceaselessly in fear of what it may do next. Without Melissa, Mrs. Sweetapple was a different woman ; with her, some people were kind enough to say she was like a coach with the drag on.

On the present occasion, Mrs. Sweetapple wished to have a quiet, uninterrupted stare at young Mrs. Granger ; therefore she took her stand outside the lych-gate, and, like a lion in the path, barred the way of the party from the farm.

"Good morning, Mr. Granger," she said, in her sharp, high-pitched voice ; a salutation which the individual in question returned by a hurried touch of his hat and a still more hurried advance onwards ; Miss Libbie, after a stiff, old-fashioned curtsey to the Rector's wife, followed suit.

The twins had slipped by in a most ingenious manner, and were half-way down the hill, calmly taking stock of the Hall people as they waited for their carriage at the foot. For John and his wife there was no escape. Mrs. Sweetapple had the former by the hand in a moment.

"How are you ?" she said, never taking her eyes off Kate for an instant. "Glad to see you up north. Introduce me to your wife."

John performed the ceremony, and Kate bowed, but something in the salutation vexed the righteous soul of Mrs. Sweetapple, who gave a little sort of jerk, as if she had a spring in the middle of her body.

Melissa was presented, opened her eyes to recognise Mrs.

John Granger, and apparently fell into a state of semi-consciousness again. Kate thought that perhaps her efforts on the asthmatic harmonium had been too much for her. She was not, at this stage of affairs, aware that it was Miss Sweetapple's "way."

"You are fortunate in the weather for your visit to our village," said the Rector's wife with acidulated sweetness, glancing patronisingly round on the church and mellowing woods, on earth and sky, as though she had had a hand in the making of them all; then, without waiting for a reply, she continued glibly: "By the way, I wonder who those people with the Whimperdales are?" Mrs. Sweetapple always spoke of Lord Whimperdale and his wife as "the Whimperdales." It impressed the common herd, and conveyed a subtle and absolutely fallacious idea of her being on quite friendly, if not intimate, terms with them.

"Two of them are the Charlton-Medways," said Kate, quietly.

"What the artist?" said John, interested in all that concerned art or literature. "Do you know them, dear?"

"Only by sight; they were pointed out to me one day at Hurlingham."

"Of course, of course. How stupid of me not to recognise them," said Mrs. Sweetapple, with a toss of her head, that made the flowers in her bonnet nod as if a hurricane were passing by.

Melissa half closed her eyes, and threw her head back.

"I don't think we ever heard of them down here; but it is interesting to see them if they have done anything remarkable."

The peculiar drawling intonation, the monotonous voice, robbed the words of any apparent viciousness, yet took the wind out of Mrs. Sweetapple's sails effectually.

"Down here!" said the lady irate. "You talk as if we lived at the back of the world."

"So we do," remarked Melissa, sweetly.

Her mother feigned deafness.

"If you would like at any time, Mrs. John," she said, addressing Kate, "to walk round the Rectory garden, I am sure the Rector and myself would be very glad. Our dahlias are considered remarkably fine."

"I wouldn't come if I were you," said Melissa; "there's nothing to see."

The small—very small—bow which Kate vouchsafed in answer to Mrs. Sweetapple's genial invitation, amused Melissa incredibly. She gave a short little laugh, abrupt and unmusical, though there was no smile upon her face.

"Isn't the house-place at the Farm the most delightful room in the world?" she said, flashing a look upon Kate. "I shall come and see you there to-morrow, if I may."

"My wife will be delighted to see you at any time, Miss Sweetapple," said John.

Then he doffed his hat, Kate bowed, and the two passed on together. Mrs. Sweetapple looked after them for a moment, and then set off at a brisk pace towards the Rectory, totally ignoring Melissa's presence.

She had learned by experience that this was a far wiser way of showing her displeasure than engaging in a war of words with an adversary so dangerous. The frugal and uncomfortable Sunday mid-day meal was on the table. Cold meat, bread, and a dish of radishes.

We have spoken of the sorrows of disagreeable people; let us now touch upon the good qualities of disagreeable people.

Mrs. Sweetapple was a bitter morsel to most, but she scraped and pared her household expenses, and wore shabby black silk and a dolman made out of a Paisley shawl, to send her sons to a public school and Oxford if possible, thus giving them the education of scholars and gentlemen. Her story is no new one. All over the United Kingdom the same tale repeats itself: out of the wretched pittance which the Church gives to so many of her hard-working servants, means must be found to educate Arthur, George, or Augustus, as

the case may be ; and cheerfully and without a murmur is the sacrifice laid upon the domestic altar. I doubt very much if there is any class of people amongst us who so patiently and practically act up to the divine command, "Take up thy cross," as the wives of our ill-paid clergy.

This may seem a digression ; but in reality it is not so. It is a touch needed to complete Mrs. Sweetapple's personality ; a bit of light gleaming among the shadows, without which the picture would be an unfinished portrait.

"That sermon of yours was quite five minutes too long this morning. I noticed—I really could not help doing so—how the attention of the people wandered. Mr. Charlton-Medway, the celebrated artist, you know, who was in the Whimperdale's pew, yawned twice behind his glove."

Now if there is anything more calculated than another to take the edge off your appetite, however keen, it is the fact being brought home to you that your eloquent discourse, just delivered, has been a deathly failure.

Poor Mr. Sweetapple tried in vain to look jaunty under the infliction, and to crop his radish with an air of indifference. Melissa, whose buoyant finery, it may as well be said once for all, owed its origin to her own deft fingers, she having the good of the two absent "boys" as much at heart as her father or mother, was a bright spot among the greeny-greys of the faded room, in her rose-coloured nun's-veiling gown, with puffed sleeves, and shady hat to match. There was a strange, close bond of sympathy between this sleek-headed slip of a girl and her heavy-looking stolid father. Doubtless he envied her courage, and watched her victories over the common enemy with admiration tempered by awe. Now she drew out the fingers of her long tan-coloured gloves (a present from an aunt in London), looking at them with her head on one side as if she wasn't quite sure if they were part of her toilet or not.

"If Mr. What's-his-name yawned, pa, I expect it was the harmonium did it. I'm sure I don't wonder. The more

Matthew Goldstraw blows into it, the less comes out of it, no matter how I squeeze the crazy old notes. I wish Lady Whimperdale would give us a new one."

"We ought to have recognised Mr.—ahem!—Charlton-Medway," said Mrs. Sweetapple, whose mind was absorbed by one topic only.

"But we didn't," put in Melissa in her monotone.

"There must have been portraits of him in the illustrated papers and things."

"We never see them."

"Of course we cannot afford to take expensive papers in regularly.

"We can't afford to take them in at all. What would become of the boys at Clifton if we took it into our heads to go into expenses of that sort? Besides, what does it matter? It was very nice that young Mrs. Granger could tell us all about it."

Mrs. Sweetapple looked less rampant for a moment, and her hard face softened. Wonderful thing the power of mother love to beautify even the plainest of women!

"Of course," she said, "Melissa is quite right about the boys; there are many things that we should like to do that we have to give up. Of course Harry's scholarship will now be a help, and, when Charlie has taken his First at Oxford, things will be quite different. We shall be able to go to the seaside every autumn—how many years is it, Rector, since we have been at the seaside? Not since Harry had the measles when he was seven, if my memory serves me right?"

They were all on common ground. The boys drew all three hearts to one centre, and the Rector, a man of peace, smiled as he munched his cold beef, and thought with self-complacent Agag, that, for that meal at least, surely the bitterness of death was past!

Not so, however; for Mrs. John Granger was soon thrown on to the conversation *tapis* as an apple of discord.

"My dear," said Mrs. Sweetapple, leaning across the table towards the nominal head of the house, to give emphasis to her words, "I was very much annoyed this morning."

"I'm sure I'm very sorry," said the Rector, "that anyone should annoy you, Penelope; I hope they won't do it again."

"You're always being annoyed by somebody, ma," put in Melissa sweetly.

"How can you say such a thing?" replied the other tartly. "I can tell you that if everyone were as slow to take offence as I am, the world would be a more peaceable place than it is."

The Rector stole a look at his daughter, and was sorry for it the next minute. He was conscious that a long course of snubbing had somewhat impaired his manliness. He sometimes found himself wondering if he could ever really have stroked his college boat, and played in the 'Varsity team.

Such "doughty deeds" seemed very far from his present personality, certainly, and he had got into a bad way of looking to a girl to fight for him the battle he was not equal to himself.

"It is bad enough," continued Mrs. Sweetapple, airing her grievance, "to be annoyed, but worse still to feel that one's family take no interest in it, and—don't care."

These last two words were said with a sort of gasping choke, a sound most familiar to the ears of the Rector and his daughter, and oftentimes a sign of still worse things to come.

"Who said I didn't care?" began the former feebly; and, to his own undoing, taking a second radish from the dish.

Mrs. Sweetapple metaphorically pounced upon him in a moment.

"Not *another* radish, Rector! Do have some consideration for your state during service this afternoon; you'll be doubled up with heartburn, and wheeze like a bellows."

"My dear——" began the poor man.

But she kept a stern eye upon him, and, as though under some mesmeric influence, he slowly placed the coveted root back on the dish.

"Perhaps you are right, Penelope," he said, sighing.

"Perhaps!" she cried; "perhaps! Did you ever know me wrong yet about your digestive powers, or rather, I should say, lack of digestive powers? I believe, I solemnly do believe, that if you hadn't me always at your elbow you'd die in a year, or even less!"

"What annoyed you, ma?" put in Melissa, as if no discussion as to the Rector's diet were being carried on; "you haven't told us yet, you know."

"What annoyed me? Why, young Mrs. Granger's manner, to be sure. Her manner was intolerable—simply intolerable. A farmer's daughter, and taking upon herself airs!"

"My dear, my dear, not exactly a farmer's daughter," interrupted the Rector, not without some show of heat. "I saw the marriage in the paper, and her father was a Colonel Sinclair, a V.C. She is the niece of——"

"I don't care who she is the niece of; she has married Thomas Granger's son, and she must abide by her bargain. I am a woman who never will stand any nonsense from anyone, and I tell you a farmer's son's wife is a farmer's daughter."

"She's just lovely," chaunted Melissa, her head thrown back, and her eyes quite closed this time.

"But, my dear," continued the Rector, in evident dismay, "John Granger is a member of the junior bar, and looked upon as a very rising young man."

"Well, I wish he'd rise at once, and have done with it then. I hate people who shilly-shally over things; but if he walked on stilts up and down the London streets it wouldn't make him a bit the less Thomas Granger's son; and what I say is this, if he had been taught his catechism properly as a child, he would never have flown in the face of Providence in the way he has. Don't tell me about that nonsensical old person they call Uncle Toser. I don't believe a word

of it ! It's all just sinful pride, and I feel called upon to bring this young woman to a true sense of her position. I am not one to shrink from responsibilities, as you know. The position which I hold as the wife of the Rector of this parish brings responsibilities with it, and I ask you, have I ever shrunk from them ? ”

“ Certainly not, my dear—certainly not,” said Mr. Sweetapple, digging the spoon hard into the cold rice-pudding.

“ Mr. Sweetapple, am I or am I not, your wife ? ”

“ Certainly, my dear—certainly,” said the gentleman in question, with an air of the deepest conviction.

“ That being so, is it—can it be tolerated for a moment, that I should be—well, so to speak, trampled upon by young Mrs. Granger ? ”

“ She was just lovely,” put in Melissa.

“ I shall take the first opportunity of bringing her to a sense of her position,” said Mrs. Sweetapple.

“ I know no one so capable of making anyone feel their position as yourself, my dear,” said the Rector suavely, peering near-sightedly over his rice pudding, and wondering if it would be possible to secure a bit of pastry without being baulked in the endeavour.

Melissa rose to leave the table, singing softly as she went :

“ I saw her but a moment,
Yet methinks I see her now,
With a wreath of orange blossoms
Around her fair young brow. . . . ”

Mrs. Sweetapple tapped the table sharply with her finger.

“ Melissa, that's not a Sunday song.”

“ Isn't it ? ” replied Melissa innocently from half-way upstairs. “ It's too pretty for week-days, anyway.”

“ My dear,” said the Rector's wife, “ I fear Melissa is going to be troublesome about young Mrs. Granger.”

And to this the Rector made no reply.

CHAPTER VIII.

MELISSA IS ALTOGETHER ASTONISHING.

AS a woman is often the most charming when the touch of autumn just tinges the summer of her life, so it is with the year. Day by day it seemed to Kate that the world of Low Cross grew more perfect and more beautiful. On the cottage roofs the patches of ragwort showed like gaudy mosaic work. The gorse on the hillsides burned and flamed more and more intensely, till its masses of bloom dazzled the eye to look upon. The Low Cross brook, that was almost a young river, stretching across the meads and through the woods like a silver thread, was all strewn with long trails of a wonderful water-weed, that bore countless white starry blossoms among its greenery. Here and there the water was tinged with brown, against which little flecks of white foam, brought down from the steep hills where the stream had its source, showed up bravely, and from its banks hart's-tongue fronds, heavy with seed, bent lovingly above the ripples. The golden fans of the chestnut came fluttering down, floating along, very boats for fairies, and the nodding rose-briar made the water blush with its bright reflection.

There is, however, one notable difference between the early summer and the early autumn. The beauty of the latter is a silent loveliness compared with the former, for then does "no bird sing" save Robin, whose lilting is apt to be a solo, except when interrupted by the cry of the shrike, or the twittering of the swallows as they cling beneath the eaves and against the thatch, tremulous with the longing for flight. The jubilant

choir of thrush and blackbird, the dominant note of the chiff-chaff or yellowhammer—these are hushed, and only the babble of the brook sings a lullaby to ripening fields sleeping in the sunshine. The world is resting on the brow of the hill ere it begins to descend the slope that leads to the valley of sleep and snow. The pale plumes of the queen of the meadow nod lazily in the slumberous warmth, and the purple loosestrife bends its slender spire as the velvet-coated bee rustles into the heart of its massed flowerets.

To all these beauties of autumnal Nature were added in Low Cross village many peculiar charms. I have said before that our northern counties are the home of music, and that in the best of all senses—namely, that music is enshrined in the hearts of the people; not merely taught as an accomplishment, but loved from early childhood. As the flowers in the cottage garden delight the eye, so the harmonies of Haydn and Beethoven delight the ear of the northcountry working-man and his children. “Daddy’s fiddle” is an object of as much veneration as a relic in the peasant-home of a Catholic country; and to see it wrapped in a red silk handkerchief and laid in its case, is to feel that no baby being laid in its cradle could have greater care and thought bestowed upon it.

To Kate, with eye to see, ear to hear, and heart to love all beauties alike of Nature and art, the many village rambles and field walks with John were an intense pleasure. What could be lovelier, she used to think, than to saunter by the lichen-covered cross on the green while the golden light of evening bathed the quaint old houses in its glow, and through the curve of the hills you could see the sweep of the purple wolds—infinite stretches of meadow-land, stirring like a restless sea as the breeze touched the grass? What more complete than to gaze on such fair sights as a larch wood gleaming in the sun, or a group of grey-blue pines each wearing a pale crown of cones, and at the same time to catch the distant sound of some such melody as “With verdure clad,” played with exquisite delicacy and feeling, floating from a cottage casement set back upon its hinge?

"John," said Kate, as they two returned late one afternoon from such a ramble, "there have been things in Low Cross that I shall never forget; calm and beautiful times that will I am sure be a help to one always—even only to remember."

"*Thank God for those dear golden days,
That help us through the rest,'*"

replied John, quoting. "Is that what you mean, Kate?"

"Yes," she said, pressing his arm closer to her side; "we must not hope for such long walks together every day when work begins again—must we, dear?"

"Hardly, but there will be something to think of," he said, with that wonderfully sweet smile, that had gone far to win her heart in the days of their first meeting.

It had not entered into Kate's mind then to connect such sweetness in a man with weakness; but a physiognomist might have warned her.

Would she have been warned?

I trow not; for surely never had the glamour of love so dazzled a maiden's eyes as it had done those of Bonnie Kate.

John had a way of saying very little and yet conveying a great deal. The one sentence, and the smile with which it was uttered, seemed to tell how sweet and precious had been these woodland wanderings to him, and Kate was silent awhile because her heart was full.

They paced slowly on in silence,—happy for the time being. Sunday, with all its discomfort and its trial, lay two days back now. Kate had forgotten—or nearly so—the bitterness, the sense of unseemliness in things. Even her sense of humour and love of the droll side of life had come to her rescue. That proposal of Mrs. Sweetapple's that she should take a walk round the Rectory garden and look at the dahlias—how Will would throw his head back, rumple his bright locks with both his hands, and roar with laughter at the notion!

If she hadn't made up her mind not to say one word to her own belongings that could militate against John's people and surroundings she would tell Will about the dahlias. It would never do to tell Aunt Cynthia under any circumstances. That dear lady's wrath would be unspeakable.

Thinking these thoughts, she had let the trouble pass. Indeed, it would have been easy to let any trouble pass, for another bright-winged messenger had flown across "the silver sea"—a still better account of the General had made her heart light. Aunt Cynthia was evidently living in a sort of ecstacy. She even began to ridicule, in a gentle, tentative way, their past anxieties and perturbations. "We let ourselves be too easily frightened," she wrote. "I watch my dear brother, and feel that we gave ourselves much needless concern; by which folly, I fear, we depressed him not a little. Oh, my dear Kate, how much I wish you were here to see for yourself! Your dear letters are so interesting, and I read them aloud. We all seem to know quite intimately the little church on the hill, and the beautiful 'beck,' with its garlands of flowers. It is very charming that your new young brother plays the violin so well, and makes Will feel that his banjo is quite, as he says, put into the shade. The dear boy is very well, and a great favourite with everyone—this of course; but—quite between ourselves—I may tell you that he does not seem to enter into my enthusiasm about his uncle's recovery as warmly as I could wish. Perhaps this apparent indifference on his part is only the affected indifference so much in vogue and so deeply to be regretted among the young men of the present day. I know that our dear Will has a heart of gold; indeed, when I reproached him ever so little the other day for this lack of warmth, I saw the tears come into his eyes. We continue to have good accounts of Chloe, so there is no drawback to our enjoyment of this lovely place and climate."

"Will always was rather given to taking a gloomy view of Uncle Anthony's health—*always*," said Kate, after she had read aloud this effusion to her husband.

"Was he?" said John, aware that she expected some comment on the subject.

"Why, you know he was. I have told you so twenty times."

"How stupid of me!"

They had lingered by the little stone bridge across the brook, where the water flowing beneath their feet ran like molten silver in the garish light. John leant upon the mossy parapet, looking down at the ripples as they passed.

"Kate," he said suddenly, "will you be sorry to leave Low Cross?"

Kate drew her breath a little quickly.

"Yes; more than all, sorry to leave your mother—mine, too, is she not?"

They were all alone in that quiet nook, and he bent and laid his lips against the long, slender, nervous hand that lay against the grey stones.

His touch was always a joy to Kate, a spell he never lost for her even in the sorry days yet to come; for, through anger, and misunderstanding, and estrangement, Kate still passionately loved her husband. The only mistake she made was that her love did not mount quite high enough—did not rise to loving even his faults and failings as being parts of himself.

She was conscious of a little pang as his lips rested on her fingers; conscious of reservations between John and herself, of the stirring of a buried wrong; and, in some subtle way, conscious at the same time of a falling in herself from the standard she had set herself to live up to before the jar in the harmonies of her life had come about.

They two could not now speak to each other "with naked hearts" as once they had done. The veil was as yet but a thin one that made the barrier, but it was there. Watching the water as it flowed, watching the flower-wreaths tremble with the current, John Granger had a mighty longing in his heart to speak out once and for all upon the subject that Kate had

willed should be buried in a shroud of silence. She had put it aside as a thing she could not bear to dwell upon. Would it not be best, even at the cost of some pain to herself and to him, to face the bitterness, and—if only it might so be—wipe it out for ever?

But he loved her so that he dreaded to hear her put her pain into words ; he shrank from looking into her face and seeing her sorrow and her trouble written there as in an open book. He knew her well enough to be sure of her perfect candour, her intense reality. If she thought him wrong she would say so, yearning over him and pitying him the while, as a mother pities the child she chides, yet not sparing him one word of the truth, and letting him see, only too clearly, all the pain in his lack of trust in her and in her love for him had caused her. This was what he dreaded most—the laying bare of Kate's sorrow. Well would it have been had he obeyed the impulse to speak out all that was in his heart. But he forbore, shielding his own weakness by recalling Kate's command to keep silence. As to Kate, a quiver shook her as the wind shakes an aspen as she intuitively felt their near approach to touching upon the subject of John's one act of disingenuousness towards her.

We have all felt the keen cutting pain of realising that one we love with all our heart and all our strength has acted, even in but a small thing, treacherously towards us. No cure exists on earth for that pain ; it can only be endured and lived down. It is not that we are unforgiving, neither revenge nor resentment may be in our hearts ; it is not that we will not, but that we cannot feel as we felt before. We would quiet our own pain gladly if we could, but something is killed, it lies there dead, it will not live again. We would put back the clock and be as we were wont to be before we were deceived ; but no one, not even God, can give us back our yesterdays. The knowledge that to-day has brought has blotted out the sunshine that can never shine with so pure and unsullied a radiance again. Kate knew instinctively that John had

hovered on the brink of speech ; she knew it by the nervous shrinking in herself, of which he too was conscious.

But the next moment the risk of words was over.

"Kate," he said, as they passed from the bridge and turned their faces homewards, "I think your coming to Low Cross has been to my mother what no one can say."

"I am so glad ; knowing her has been to me what I can hardly say."

"She spoke of you to me last night—the first time she has said much. She said, 'At eventide it shall be light. It is eventide with me now, John ; and she, your wife, has been light to me.'"

Kate saw the landscape before them all blurred and indistinct. She pressed closer to her husband's side. The pale, helpless hands of the sick house-mother were drawing these two, heart to heart, and soul to soul. In that moment they were very close together—one in their love for a beautiful soul that formed a blessed link between them.

"All the goodness has not been on my side," said Kate, presently. "Your mother has been so gentle and tender to me from the very first that I could not choose but love her. I had never before thought of such a life as hers being possible. It is like sacred music, that lifts all one's thoughts from earth to heaven ; her love for all her dear ones so intense, her patience and submission so perfect."

"Yes," said John, "it has grown to that with the long years of helplessness and pain ; it has been like some star that has shone out brighter and brighter for the darkness round about it. I see my mother greatly changed, Kate ; she seems to me like a lovely picture that is slowly fading away. They will wake up some day to find the canvas blank, and then, Kate—then they will find out what they have lost."

"More especially Aunt Libbie," said Kate.

"More especially Aunt Libbie," echoed John. "And yet, how much she has been to us all, how much she has done ! It is one of the sad things of life, Kate, that some people turn

themselves wrong side out, as it were, and do themselves a cruel injustice. I have a remembrance of Aunt Libbie nursing Humbie through the scarlet fever. She was attentive to every duty, watchful, resolute, everything except tender. Then when the crisis was past, and the doctor had told her the boy would live, I chanced to come upon her on her knees, her face bowed upon her hands, the tears stealing through her fingers. I think ever afterwards I had a different idea of Aunt Libbie. I know that many times and oft I have found that one memory help me to patience when she has spoken hardly of my mother. I have felt that I would sooner judge Aunt Libbie by her heart than by her tongue."

"She does not like—nay, more, she dislikes me," said Kate.

"She does not understand you," answered John.

Again they were trenching on forbidden ground, and each (mentally) drew back hurriedly. A little time of silence brought them to the farm gate. Then, with a word as to the perfect beauty of the afternoon, with a glance upward from Kate at the church that seemed to be half-way to heaven, so deep and pure a blue was the sky amid which it reared its tower, they went in.

Surely the usually serene atmosphere of the household was in some way perturbed? Reared up against the tall, oak-cased clock were two parasols—a brown matronly affair, and a frisky-looking pink one. But these innocent objects could not account for a war of words in the kitchen heard as Kate opened the house-place door.

The farmer, strangely stirred, or so it appeared, yet keeping ward and guard over his voice—a proceeding that rendered him very red in the face and exceedingly short in the breath—was the centre of a group of three, the twins and Aunt Libbie; while Humbie, very much amused, as anyone could see with half an eye, but yet evidently going in fear of some catastrophe or another, hovered in the background.

Between his massive finger and thumb Mr. Granger held a

small square piece of pasteboard, every now and again flicking it with the finger and thumb of the other hand : he was far too much excited to notice the entrance of John and his wife, or, indeed, to notice anything at all save the subject-matter in hand.

This Kate soon saw to be a lady's visiting-card, on which was printed in letters rather larger than is usual : "Mrs. Dionysius Sweetapple, The Rectory, Low Cross."

"Is there any need for to have it wrote up large like that?" said the farmer huskily, in what there is every reason to believe he considered a delicate whisper. "Is there any need to have it wrote up like that? Is there any fear we'll forget it! Doan't every man, woman, and child i' Low Cross know it well enoo by now; and then to have it wrote up like that! I conna abide such ways. What's hoo come for? Is hoo come for to tell me how to rig my taters and hoe my turmits, and bed down my beastes, as hoo did last toime?"

The twins, as was usual with them in any critical moment, had fast hold of each other. Aunt Libbie lifted her mittened hands in horror at the position of affairs, and tried in vain to get a word of explanation in edgeways.

"Mrs. Sweetapple has come to call upon my wife," said John. "Don't you worry yourself, father. Kate will manage her right enough."

"Then Kate's a clever wench," said the farmer, in his excitement making free with his daughter-in-law's name for the first and only time during her stay under his roof ; "and I warn her to be wick and slape wi' madam, for she's an ugly sort, and no mistake. Last time she favoured us, naught would do but she must go up and see your mother; and when I went in for to speak a word or two after the creetur wur gone, I saw a big tear on Susie's cheek; and says I, all on fire like : 'What's t' varmint bin sayin' to hurt ye, lass?' Bo' Susie was never one to make much ado; and says she, ever so gentle like : 'Her means well enoo, Thomas. Don't go to fash yersel'. It's me that's fullish, being so sickly and so easy-

hurted.' I shook my fist next toime I passed t' Rectory, and I hope madam wur' at t' window to see me do it."

"What shall we do?" moaned Miss Libbie. "We can't open the doors while brother's going on this gate; and it's past all politeness, to keep the ladies waiting like this, Mrs. John."

"Don't let me hinder ye," said the farmer, breathing hard, snatching his hat up from the table and making for the back door. "I'm off to t' shippon to see t' dun cow, hoo's no so well as I could wish. When t' house is clear o' varmints, send one o' t' girls to tell me so."

"Oh!" cried Miss Libbie, "they'll hear that door bang, sure enoo'; and we'll have it set all over the parish as brother's bin at t' 'Dale Arms' ower long, an' come home fullish."

Kate meanwhile had been quietly taking off her hat, she set it on a chair, touched the soft ripples and curls that fell about her brow, with deft fingers, and then, spruce and neat as if she had just come out of a band-box, as Ray said afterwards, she took her way to that uncomfortable room, the "best parlour," John having told her he thought she had better go alone.

Mrs. Sweetapple was gazing at the celebrated fire-screen, and making withering remarks thereupon, if one might judge from her countenance. She turned sharply round as Kate went in, holding her *pince-nez* high on her nose and looking at the new-comer as if she were an intruder.

"How are you?" she said, in the same high-pitched tone that had made Kate shiver in the church lane. "Meant to come yesterday, but was detained; the Acton-Chomleys, delightful people from quite the other side of the county, dropped in unexpectedly."

"They came to ask pa for some votes for an idiot asylum," said Melissa, who, having shaken hands with Kate, was sitting, with head thrown back and eyes half closed, in a chair encrusted with antimacassars in chenille and

beads. "We don't know them at all, they have never been to see us before."

When she had finished speaking Melissa closed her eyes entirely, so that the lightnings of her mother's indignant glances struck upon a dead wall.

Mrs. Sweetapple felt unspeakably aggravated by something, she could hardly have told you what, in young Mrs. Granger. She had a sort of feeling that this kind of thing was not what she had come out to see. The slight, yet womanly figure ; the simple dress, upon every fold of which even in its very simplicity fashion had set her hall-mark ; the bit of priceless lace round her slender throat ; the spray of purple vetch fastened in with a pin, whose head was a single brilliant, that blazed like a star, the white, active-looking hands daintily jewelled ; the small head, tress-crowned ; the lovely, quiet-looking eyes ; the air of complete repose about the whole figure—all these things revolted the soul of Mrs. Sweetapple.

"I hope you like Low Cross ? It is a charming village, and the people worship Mr. Sweetapple."

Here a sniff from Melissa made her mother turn sharply upon her ; but the girl's face was a blank, and her hands were folded in her lap in an access of meekness.

"Of course it is very natural," continued the oracle, "for in a country parish the clergyman holds a very prominent and important position."

"Naturally," said Kate with a calm little bend of the head which the Rector's wife thought truly detestable.

As to Melissa, she stole a glance at young Mrs. Granger which that newly-made matron saw fit to ignore.

"There is delightful society round about—old families, you know, who have been in the county for generations."

"Some of them," put in Melissa softly.

"Well, well, there are exceptions, of course, but we may be said to be highly favoured socially, and I often tell Melissa she is not half sensible enough of her advantages. Now, there are the people from Freshton Park, charming—charming ; the

son plays the banjo divinely, and the old people are what I call real, sterling family folks. One of the daughters was presented at court, so you may have heard of them in London?"

"What is the name?" said Kate, not a shadow of a smile upon her face.

"Er—Smith," said Mrs. Sweetapple, with a rather crest-fallen air.

"Not a very uncommon one," said Kate.

"N—no," replied the other, "perhaps not; but so thoroughly English."

Kate, not having arrived at that condition of mind in which to be "thoroughly English" appears at once the most coveted distinction and the highest guarantee of perfection, felt somewhat puzzled what to reply; but Mrs. Sweetapple was not exacting in that respect. Her tongue was like the flow of the beck through Low Cross Bridge.

"Then there is dear Lady Dermot; she always singles me out in the most flattering manner."

"Her daughter has got so talked about she is glad to have anyone to hold on to," said Melissa, still with her eyes shut. "If they didn't happen to be one of the real old county people, the girl would have been cut dead long since; she's just got crazy about a clergyman, a man with a wife and two children, and he had to quit. Lady Dermot never took any notice of us before, but ma talked to her one day when none of her relations were there to back her up, and we've never got rid of her since."

"Got rid of her! Melissa!" cried Mrs. Sweetapple, trying to focus her daughter with the *pince-nez*, but able to glare at nothing save a face with long lashes down-drooped under a rose-pink hat.

"Yes," said Melissa; "she's no good. When people begin to forget her daughter's misdemeanours, Lady Dermot will begin to forget us; besides, I'm like pa, I hate the girl, with her bold eyes and her wriggling ways, just like the porriwiggles *in the pond at the end of our garden*."

"Melissa," said Mrs. Sweetapple severely, "don't be vulgar."

"Are porriwiggles vulgar?"

Could anything equal the innocence of Melissa's face as she put this query?

"No, certainly not. Of course they can't help being what they are; but it is vulgar to speak of them, and young Mrs. Granger must think so."

"Indeed, I do not; I could not think you vulgar," said Kate, turning with a bright smile to Melissa, who by this time was neither asleep nor dozing.

Mrs. Sweetapple began to feel that the order of creation was, in some way, being reversed. It almost seemed as though this assertive young woman, whom she, the wife of the Vicar of Low Cross, had come expressly to bring to a proper sense of her position, was sitting in judgment on herself and her daughter, Melissa playing into her hands in a way disgusting to contemplate.

It was clear that bigger guns must be brought into the field, and to bear upon the enemy.

"The young Countess of Craigleigh is naturally the leader of society in the county here, and most charming, though, alas! very distant neighbour——" began the campaigner, as a sort of tentative sortie.

"The Countess never spoke to us but once, and that was when she asked ma for a ticket in a raffle at the Freestone Church Bazaar last year," said Melissa, apparently giving her confidence to the larch woods seen through the open window, and very sleepily to them.

The occasion being an exceptionally trying one, Mrs. Sweetapple felt it called for exceptional treatment. She ignored Melissa, much aided in the task by the fact that young Mrs. Granger was also apparently deaf to the voice of that charmer.

After executing this bit of strategy, she fell back in graceful retreat, waving her hand, *pince-nez* and all, as if to dismiss Yorkshire county, or at all events that side of it.

"But I weary you, Mrs. John, talking of people who are, after all, strangers to you."

"As many of them are to us."

"So I will only say there is a sprinkling of *nouveaux riches* who have wormed their way in among the county people."

"Hanging on to their petticoats."

"Just so," turning for once cordially to Melissa, "and giving themselves a great many more airs than the original article, who, as a matter of fact, give themselves none. But let us talk of things nearer home. Are you not delighted with this dear old house?"

Those who knew Mrs. Sweetapple were well aware that in her polite moments lurked the deepest danger. Melissa gave a little start as her mother spoke thus suavely, and her bright clear eyes lost all their languor. She looked thoroughly alert, from the crown of her broad hat to the tip of her neat leather shoes.

"I am delighted with Low Cross, altogether, Mrs. Sweetapple," said Kate—"most of all with the church on the hill, and the ridges of larch wood all the way down."

"Yes, how very sweet of you to say so; but I was speaking of the farm, so quaint, so old-fashioned, quite a model Yorkshire homestead! It is considered one of the best farms on Lord Whimperdale's estate."

Kate was generous-hearted and unsuspicuous by nature, but she was also quick-witted and full of keen intuitions. She scented war in the air, and drew her breath a little quickly, though by no outward sign could anyone have told what was passing in her mind.

There is nothing which makes you love anyone so dearly, or rather so helps you to realise how dearly you do love them, as having to take up cudgels in their defence.

At that moment Kate was ready to vow she would not for the whole world have come to any other home than the "best farm on Lord Whimperdale's estate"; would not have found John's people one whit different to what they were. Even

Aunt Libbie—for the moment—became clothed with a dearness not her own.

"Lord Whimperdale is certainly to be congratulated upon having such a tenant as my father-in-law."

There, it was out!

One must not say it did not cost in the saying, but we may say that the beautiful, fearless eyes of the speaker looked straight at Mrs. Sweetapple's *pince-nez*, and the cheek that coloured high and hotly was not young Mrs. Granger's.

Still, the campaigner was only flurried, not dismayed.

"Thomas Granger is indeed greatly respected," she said, dropping the *pince-nez* into her lap, "and deserves to be. Everyone feels deeply, too, for him in his family affliction."

"You mean his wife's illness? It seems hardly right to use the word 'affliction,' in her case, Mrs. Sweetapple. It is like having something wonderful and beautiful in the heart of the home, that quiet room, that gentle spirit."

"'Tis like a little heaven below," quoted Melissa, to cover the tremble in Kate's voice; "at least, I know I always feel as if I had been in a sort of heaven when I go to see Mrs. Granger."

"Still, my dear, it is very sad—very, very sad; a woman whose whole life was full of hard, active work—house-drudgery such as you or I can have no idea of."

"Do you think she could possibly ever have looked more of a drudge than you and I when we have to turn to and cook the dinner, and then dress and sit down to it, and look as if each dish was a surprise to us? I don't. I shall never forget when the Smiths came over to lunch, how my face burnt from stirring the——"

"Melissa, don't exaggerate!"

"That's what you said when I put too much cinnamon in the pudding, ma."

"Melissa, you are making yourself ridiculous. Every lady——"

"Oh, I dare say. Every lady sees to her household; her

price is above rubies, etc.; but they don't do what you and I have to do, ma. Don't tell me!"

"Still," said Mrs. Sweetapple, beginning to look draggled as to plumage, and hotter in the face than was becoming to a woman with a high nose, "it is very sad about poor Mrs. Granger; though, of course, as your papa says, we must kiss the rod—"

"Pa never says anything of the sort; he says you should help people to bear their sorrows, and not moan over them. He's a dear, kind-hearted old duck is pa."

"That I am sure he is from his preaching," said Kate; "there were such sweet and tender thoughts in that sermon on Sunday."

Melissa's face changed to something sweet and tender too.

"He's always like that," she said; "that's why the people in the village love him so."

"I really am very glad, Mrs. John," said Mrs. Sweetapple, taking heart of grace, "that you are so pleased with everything here—very glad indeed. I am sure you have every reason to be proud of your husband, a man who has made his way so well—really quite the gentleman," murmured Mrs. Sweetapple.

"I am very proud of my husband," said Kate, rising suddenly, and looking every inch a queen, as the rich colour mantled to her cheek, and her eyes shone like stars; "it is a good thing for a wife to be proud of her husband; but you must pardon me for telling you, Mrs. Sweetapple, that I have lived among people who look upon it as the height of ill-breeding and bad taste to discuss those who are nearest and dearest to us."

"Ma ain't proud of pa," said Melissa, with childlike innocence and frankness; "she snubs him all the time."

What catastrophe might have followed this untoward remark will never be known; for at that moment the attention of all three ladies was attracted by a groom in livery, riding a chestnut horse, slowly passing the window.

"The Whimperdale livery!" cried Mrs. Sweetapple complacently. "The man has doubtless been to the Rectory with a message, and come on here after me."

"Perhaps he hasn't," said Melissa.

The question was soon settled, for Miss Libbie, with her frostiest manner on, and a letter in her hand, entered the room. She greeted the guests with prim frigidity, and then turned to Kate :

"Do you know where John is? There's a letter for him from the Hall."

"He went to the post, I think," said Kate, who had fully recovered her equanimity.

Then the ladies took leave, and Kate, a little worn out when the ordeal was over, sat down a moment in the window-seat.

All at once came a rustle and rush as of a bird's wings, and Melissa, red and breathless, was on her knees before Kate, holding her hands, and covering them with kisses.

"Don't mind ma," she said, panting; "she always goes on like that. I saw it hurt you, and that hurt me, so I came—I left my parasol on purpose. You stick to Lady Whimperdale, she's the sort for you. Look here, Mrs. John—Mrs. Kate, you're just lovely!"

And the bird had flown before Kate could speak a word.

"Melissa," said Mrs. Sweetapple, who had been unusually silent during the walk home, "what can have been in that letter from the Hall?"

"Perhaps they've asked Mr. and Mrs. John to go and spend a week there. I should if I were Lady W.; she's just lovely!"

CHAPTER IX.

LADY WHIMPERDALE.

WE are more privileged than poor Mrs. Sweetapple, and can look over John Granger's shoulder and read the letter from Steadly Hall. It was short, and to the purpose.

"DEAR MR. GRANGER,—I have just learnt that your wife is a niece of my dear old comrade, Anthony Pierrepont. Will you allow my wife to call upon her, and let us look forward to welcoming you both under our roof? I have always thought of Anthony Pierrepont as the best, truest, and bravest of men, and I count it an honour to meet anyone belonging to him.—I remain, faithfully yours,

"WHIMPERDALE."

"I fancied the name of Whimperdale was familiar to me," said Kate, reading the letter as John handed it to her, after reading it aloud. "I know now—I have heard Uncle Anthony mention it in speaking of the days of his Indian service."

"You would like her to come, dear?" said John, looking gravely at his wife's face.

The twins standing by, as usual side by side, like pigeons on a rail, felt that no more tremendous crisis in life was possible than that which had now come about. Their eyes were round and red with excitement; their breath came as quick as though they had been running half-way up Church Hill.

What effect would this last piece of news have upon the postmaster's daughter?

Still more important question, what view would Mrs. Sweetapple take of things?

Would she be crushed (it was difficult to fancy her in that flabby condition), or would she be rampant and resentful, and come and flounce about like the bubbly-jock in the straw-yard? Anyway, it was delightful—too, too delightful! Not a spark of envy or jealousy reigned in those simple breasts. Leah and Rachel gloried in "Mrs. John's" glory; they were quite willing to shine with a reflected light. They did not wonder at the people from the Hall wanting to come and see her—not they!

It was only natural—but oh, so delightful! They gazed at her, wondering what she would put on, and wherewithal she would be clothed, when Lady Whimperdale should visit her in state, the beautiful long-tailed horses of the Hall carriage champing their bits opposite the best parlour windows.

Lady Whimperdale often went to see the sick poor in Low Cross. More than once she had been to see Mrs. Granger, and brought her lovely fruit from the hothouses at the Hall. But this was a different kind of thing altogether. This was to be a proper visit, such as one lady pays to another—a visit that their brother's wife would have to return, no doubt attired in a tiny, pale pink bonnet of which they had caught a glimpse more than once, snugly ensconced in its box—a bonnet that had tiny feathers at the side, such fairy things that they stirred with every breath you took as you were looking at them.

Did they not know how Mrs. Sweetapple had come and flouted them all after the one or two semi-public occasions of her own appearance among what she chose to speak of as "the Whimperdale set"?

Now she would flout no more; her days for prancing and crowing were over.

It was wonderful to the twins to hear their brother ask

Kate if she would "like" Lady Whimperdale to come—as if there could be two opinions about the matter!

Kate, too, did not appear in the least excited or, to use their own word, "upset." Perhaps (this suggestion was made in the privacy of the room with the dormer window) in her own home, and among her own people, she was used to this kind of thing every day. A certain awe came over them as they spoke of this possibility.

Kate was glad at the coming of that letter from the Hall. She was glad to think she would hear the voice that matched the beautiful face of Lady Whimperdale, touch the hand of the woman who had looked at her with a look full of gentleness and sympathy from the curtained pew in the gallery. She was happy too in the compliment paid to the General.

The words in Lord Whimperdale's letter lingered in her mind all day—"the best, the truest, the bravest of men." Yes, that was just it—that was just Uncle Anthony all over.

These thoughts brought a sickening sensation of longing with them. Oh, that she could look upon that tender, patient face—could feel the clasp of his arms about her once again!—could hear him call her his "Bonnie, Bonnie Kate!"

She began to reproach herself with a thousand sins of omission towards him—sins existent only in her own sensitive and excited imagination.

But we are all like that; when separation comes, when opportunity is past, we cry, with "an exceeding bitter cry": "I might have done more! Would God I had the time given me over again!"

This was the letter that John Granger wrote in reply to the one from the Hall :

"DEAR LORD WHIMPERDALE,—My wife will be delighted to see Lady Whimperdale. It will be a great happiness to her to meet those who hold General Pierrepont in such high estimation. I am sure you will hear with regret that his health has been sadly broken down of late. He has gone to

Madeira with his sister and nephew to try change of climate, and I am thankful to say our last accounts of him are decidedly improved. With kind regards, in which my wife joins, I remain, yours faithfully,

“JOHN GRANGER.”

John was fully conscious of the nice delicacy of Lord Whimperdale's own letter, and felt that the best return to make for it was to accept the proffered courtesy in the most simple and direct manner.

In his heart of hearts he was inclined to put down Lady Whimperdale's wish to make Kate's acquaintance quite as much to the charm and grace of his wife's appearance as to her lord's previous knowledge of the General. It appeared to John that to look at Kate was to long to know her ; at all events, that had been his own case, and he was incapable of feeling any surprise at seeing the same symptoms developed in anyone else.

If you saw a star shining overhead, you naturally gazed at it. If you saw a sweet flower blooming, you naturally longed to gather it, and set it in your bosom.

That was the sort of way in which John Granger looked at the attitude of the world towards his wife Kate.

“Do you think Lady Whimperdale will come to-day ? ” said Ray, with round, shining eyes, the morning after that precious missive had arrived from the Hall. Kate looked up quietly from her work.

“One can't tell that, dear Ray,” she said, smiling ; “but I want you and Leah to do me a kindness. I want you to get me some of your sweetest flowers, and some of those leaves of eglantine and bramble that are turning all gold and red, and then I want you to help me make the house-place look as charming as we can.”

“The house-place ! ” cried Ray, in surprised, crescendo notes ; and Leah, who, of course, was not far off, said : “Oh, Kate ! ” and then blushed as rosy as the brambles at her own daring.

Then the twins spoke both together.

"We never thought you would like to have Lady Whimperdale shown into the house-place!"

But Kate was determined to get the better of the "best parlour," *côte que côte*. She thought with a shudder of the black lace cloak, with pearl-grey "points," surrounded by a forest of antimacassars, and perhaps decorated with a pendant one.

"I think the house-place just one of the loveliest rooms in the world—Miss Sweetapple said so the other day, you know."

"Did she?" from Ray, with the merest *soupir* of a pout.

"Well, I suppose it *is* pretty in its way," from Leah, with a regretful sigh to the memory of the many adornments of the best parlour.

"Indeed it is," said Kate, "and now, let us make it prettier still."

Enthusiasm is catching, and soon the three were hard at work; soon bright leaves shone up against the high, dark oak panels, and lovely groups of blossoms, seen against a mellow brown background, looked like pictures upon wood.

"What a way you have with flowers!" cried Leah, clasping her hand in ecstasy.

"What a way she has with everything!" echoed Ray, and some demon of fun and daring rising within her, she twirled round the room to a slow swinging tune set to the words, "Kate, Bonnie Kate, our beautiful Kate!"

John, popping his head in at the door, wondered what all the ado was about, and as he looked at his sister's revolving figure, put his arm about Kate's shoulders, and asked:

"Have you bewitched her, Kate?—as you did me," he added, laughing.

"It is a good thing, sir, that it did not take the same effect in your case anyway, or Aunt Cynthia might have thought you were what Will calls 'a little luny.'"

"This," said Ray, with a magnificent wave of the hand round the room, "is for my Lady Whimperdale."

"I hope Lady Whimperdale will like it," said John smiling. Then he left them to it.

"I'm glad he's gone," said Leah, "because we want to ask you something."

Ray came up to Kate's other side, and the two looked at her with serious, longing eyes.

"What are you going to wear?"

"To wear?"

"Yes—to put on."

"Oh, you mean my dress? I never change my dress unless I am going out—that is, I mean, till evening." It had never entered Kate's head that she would be expected to dress up to the occasion. "Is there anything amiss with this one?" she added, glancing down at her pretty skirt.

"This one," was the shining grey she had worn when first she arrived at Low Cross. It had a close, upright collar, and at the side of her throat was a blood-red rose, Humbie's gift that morning.

The twins looked disconcerted. They had fondly imagined a gorgeous toilette, perhaps the pink and lace affair which had seemed to them a garment of the most delicious.

But alas! there was no time for comment; little enough indeed for flight.

With no clump of restless steeds, no pomp and circumstance of arrival, a quiet figure was suddenly in their midst. Lady Whimperdale had walked slowly up the broad cobbled pathway, and stood at the open door.

There was a rush as of wings—Leah's and Rachel's cotton skirts in rapid flight upstairs—and at the same moment Humbie appeared round the corner of the house.

Lady Whimperdale greeted him with genial kindness, and patted Jack, who, scenting a friend to dogs, waved his tail and trotted up the passage as if to show the way into the house-place.

"Kate," said Humbie simply, "here is Lady Whimperdale."

Then Kate heard the voice that matched the face—the

voice "soft and low" that is such an admirable thing in woman. She also saw two kindly hands outstretched for hers.

"It is so good of you to let me come to see you—I am so glad for us to meet," said Lady Whimperdale, and Kate answered in a voice that had a little thrill in it: "Not more glad than I am."

It was infinitely foolish, of course, but she felt a strange inclination to cry—why, she would have found it hard to explain to herself. But the choking sensation was quickly overcome, and soon, Humbie and Jack having disappeared, the two women were chatting together with as much ease and understanding of each other as though their acquaintance were of old standing, instead of being for all the world like Jonah's gourd.

What these elective affinities consist of, it is for none of us even to try to understand. They are—and with this we must be content. The whole current of a life may be changed by an apparently casual introduction in the street. You meet someone of whose existence you were absolutely ignorant until that moment, and are conscious of a deep, sweet melody running through your life for evermore.

It was so with Kate and Lady Whimperdale. The electric current of sympathy was established. It was for the future to show how the lines thus made would be utilised by fate in the developments of a life's history.

Before the two parted a pleasant programme was arranged for a day later in the week. John and his wife were to go to the Hall early, the former to join a shooting party, Kate, "to give yourself to me for a long chat," said Lady Whimperdale, with the winning smile that made her face more beautiful than that of a girl; "and then join our sportsmen for lunch on the heather." After this, a visit was paid to the quiet room upstairs, that always seemed to Kate like some sacred fane, and the exquisite power of expressing sympathy possessed by Lord Whimperdale's wife struck Kate anew. What is this lovely gift that hallows the life of its possessor,

and brightens the grey lives of others as a ray of sunshine on a cloudy day illumines the world it touches ?

Is it not even the in-dwelling spirit of Christ ; the reflection of that radiance which is in truth the Light of the World ?

There is no thought of self in a heart thus saturated with the love of humanity for the love of God. Suffering is the only passport needed to this rich store of tenderness and sympathy.

As Kate and her visitor left the room a limpid tear might have been seen stealing down Susan Granger's face. But it was not a tear of sorrow, rather of gladness ; for a smile hovered round the lips that moved in a silent prayer of thankfulness.

Some trouble had been in the mother's heart, and it was raised and lightened, though not perhaps taken away altogether.

Thus we see the inner meaning of the myth about the good fairy from whose lips fell pearls every time she spoke. These pearls are words of sympathy ; they are precious exceedingly.

Kate sauntered through the golden autumn sunshine to the gate with Lady Whimperdale, and after bidding her adieu, stood a moment, shading her eyes with her hand from the glare, and watching down the lane. So standing she saw a figure bar Lady Whimperdale's way, and heard a too familiar voice cry out :

“ How are you ? ”

It was Mrs. Sweetapple, and, as she beat a rapid retreat, Kate felt as though her new friend was indeed handed over to the enemy.

Had she remained where she was, she might have heard at all events a portion of the conversation that followed, since the Rector's wife was by no means of Shakespeare's opinion as to the intonation most charming in a woman.

“ How are you, Lady Whimperdale ? ” she said again, shaking that lady's somewhat limp hand in a vastly hearty grip. “ Been to call at Low Cross Farm—eh ? ”

"Yes, I have been to call on Mrs. John Granger."

Mrs. Sweetapple fixed her *pincer-nez* on her nose in a determined and warlike manner, resolved, as it were, to lose no possible phase of her ladyship's state of mind.

"A sweet young creature!" she said, speaking in a tentative voice, and with a manner which suggested a readiness to develop on any side that might be advisable.

"A very sweet young creature," echoed my lady, stepping on towards the village, and looking straight before her as she spoke.

"Ahem!" said Mrs. Sweetapple, drawing her dolman close, and allowing it to define the sharp angles of her figure more clearly; "quite so, and capable of showing much good common-sense, placed as she is in a most trying position."

"What position?"

This time Lady Whimperdale turned full upon her companion, her eyes grave and questioning, all shadow of a smile gone from her chiselled face.

"Well, you know——"

"No, I do not know."

"Still, anyone can see, Lady Whimperdale, that Mr. John has married a little above him, as the saying goes, and to find herself the wife of a farmer's son must be a trying position to Mrs. John."

"It is the crown regal of a true gentlewoman that she can fill any position, Mrs. Sweetapple, and fill it well. I can imagine nothing more perfectly in harmony with her surroundings than Mrs. John Granger appeared to me this morning. That lovely old panelled room, and herself in the midst of the flowers that decked it so prettily, made a perfect picture; I have not enjoyed paying a visit so much, I don't know when. By the way, how is old Martha Griddle's rheumatism of late? This warm weather ought to be good for her."

"I think I heard Melissa say she was better."

"Melissa is as good as a curate to the Rector, Mrs. Sweetapple."

Mrs. Sweetapple tossed her head.

"Oh, Melissa is a good girl in her way, but she is fanciful—very fanciful. She is absolutely bewitched about this young Mrs. Granger, 'makes herself downright ridiculous,' as the Rector was saying only yesterday."

"Dear me!" said Lady Whimperdale; "that does not sound so much like our dear, good Rector. I cannot fancy him speaking so of Melissa."

"Well, he didn't exactly say so of himself, you know. I put it to him in a plain, straightforward kind of way."

"I understand; but you must tell him I can't have him begin to differ from me, even when you put things in a plain straightforward kind of way to him, Mrs. Sweetapple—and say that I am quite as much bewitched with Mrs. John Granger as Melissa can be."

At this point the Hall carriage—or, rather, a daintily-appointed pony-carriage that Lady Whimperdale greatly affected—drove up alongside, and Mrs. Sweetapple found herself left *plantée-là* on the side-walk, having only just time to make a bow with as much cordiality squeezed into it as the shortness of the notice would allow, and to wave her hand, before Lady Whimperdale was well under way, for the edification of some neighbours who were bearing into sight.

Mrs. Sweetapple stood still, hesitating, cogitating, pondering, half turned towards the farm gates, half turned towards home, and finally resolved that the latter direction was the right one, the present social crisis being too portentous to be faced without some home counsel. Melissa might be—no doubt was—a little given to be "fanciful," but even the mother recognised the fact that under the mask of slumberous indifference she was shrewd and sensible beyond her years.

Mrs. Sweetapple had a crestfallen look very unusual with her. Even the feathers in her bonnet seemed to droop, and stand in need of preening. She felt she had taken a false (social) step; she had rubbed Lady Whimperdale's fur the wrong way.

Who would have supposed that that slip of a girl, with her big brown eyes, and objectionably imperious way of carrying her head, would have bewitched my lady at first sight, to say nothing of Melissa?

It was all very well for people to say the lady of the Hall was the most gentle of mortals, but she could not only say there was but one word that expressed what had passed in that lane. She—Penelope Sweetapple, the wife of the Rector of Low Cross—had been snubbed—unmistakably and indisputably snubbed.

What was the use of her taking the trouble to let Mrs. John Granger feel her own position and place, if she was, on the other hand, encouraged in this ridiculous manner by those who ought to know better?

But on the road home Mrs. Sweetapple's storm-tossed thoughts cooled down. There are powers in the world that one cannot fight against. Of these the Hall influence was one. When you could not fight against the current, the best thing was to swim with it.

It was with an almost jaunty step that Mrs. Sweetapple reached the Rectory.

Many plans were revolving in her mind. Her thoughts were like the pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope—now forming this combination, now that.

The result of these reflections was made manifest that same afternoon, when a note arrived at the farm, carried thereto by a small and wizened-looking boy who worked in the Rectory garden, ran errands, and made himself generally useful.

The letter ran thus:—

“DEAR MRS. JOHN GRANGER,—It will give the Rector and myself much pleasure if you and your husband will take tea with us at half-past four o'clock to-morrow afternoon. We project a little tennis.—I remain, yours sincerely,

“PENELOPE SWEETAPPLE.”

“P.S.—We have a most interesting visitor with us just now.”

"The visitor is thrown in as a bait," said John, reading the note over his wife's shoulder.

"Must we go?" said Kate, rather piteously, looking at her husband.

"If you wouldn't mind it very much. Mr. Sweetapple has always been a good friend of ours, Kate, and you know he was Humbie's tutor."

The note of acceptance was written and sent, and Leah and Rachel at once set to chattering as to what Kate would wear on such an important occasion.

"You know Miss Sweetapple is very tasty in the matter of gowns," said Ray.

"So I am to outshine Miss Melissa, am I?" said Kate, tipping the girl under her soft round chin, and smiling, not ill-pleased at the love these simple hearts gave her so ungrudgingly.

"I wonder who the visitor may be!" said Ray; "they have odd ones sometimes, I can tell you. Once they had a black missionary—he breathed so hard it frightened Leah to sit next him, and he looked as if his clothes were so tight they squeezed him all over."

"And another time there was a converted Jew," put in Leah; "he spoke through his nose, and called us his Christian friends—he was dreadful. They asked everyone to meet him, and he gave a temperance lecture in the garden—the people got so tired."

"Dear me!" said Kate, drawing a long breath; "I hope there will be nothing of that sort to-morrow."

CHAPTER X.

BY THE BROOK.

NEITHER converted Jew nor dark-skinned missionary greeted Kate's eyes as she entered the Rectory drawing-room on the following day.

Only Melissa, in a marvellous dress of snowy white, all goffered frills, made and "got up" by her own cunning fingers, and a little white capote fitting close to her sleek dark head.

John had been waylaid by the good old Rector, shuffling about among his dahlias, and eager to show off his garnered hay, and the state of his crops generally.

"Quite in a small way, John, of course, after the farm ; but still, neat and compact—neat and compact, I flatter myself."

Then, when the two were alone, Mr. Sweetapple congratulated him upon his marriage.

"Your path seems to have fallen in pleasant places, your choice to be a most happy one. God give you peace and happiness all your days."

Perhaps there was the slightest possible faltering of the voice as the Rector gave utterance to the word "peace," but, if so, it may as well be said that such trifling signals of distress were the only disloyalty of which he was ever guilty towards his Penelope.

Meanwhile, Kate was wondering in her own mind if it were possible the urbane and genial hostess who greeted her with such effusion could be the same personage who had called at the farm but a day or two ago, and made her feel as though a hive of hornets were let loose.

That Lady Whimperdale could be a factor in this change never entered her head, such forms of social toadyism never having as yet come under her notice.

Mrs. Sweetapple was more than effusive ; she was confidential. She addressed herself to Kate as to a person who, standing on the same social platform as herself, could enter fully into her feelings on social points—more especially slights, or fancied slights, inflicted upon her by people who were “not quite—You know—eh ?”

In the present case a hamper of apples, said to be of a rare kind, had been sent to the Rector’s wife, and some indiscreet admissions on the part of the messenger entrusted with them had led to the most painful suspicions.

“ I am perfectly convinced they were mere windfalls,” she said, sitting close to Kate on the low ottoman in the window, and fixing her *pince-nez*, as usual with her in moments of excitement. “ If so, I cannot but feel that Mrs. Beesley has taken a most unwarrantable liberty, and I am thoroughly glad we did not invite her daughters here this afternoon. Apples that were mere windfalls ! ”

“ But if they were good——” began Kate.

“ Still,” interrupted Mrs. Sweetapple, “ I feel it to be a slight.” Then she added emphatically, and laying her hand on Kate’s arm to add weight to her words : “ I cannot feel it to be the same compliment as though they had been picked from the tree purposely for me, and I shall never feel the same towards Mrs. Beesley—never.”

Seeing it was no good to pursue the subject of the unfortunate windfalls Kate said a word or two as to the Rector’s love of his garden. Ill prepared indeed was she for the rush of confidences to follow.

Mrs. Sweetapple moved nearer still to her guest, and spoke in awe-inspiring tones :

“ Mrs. Granger, the Rector is a martyr. I can assure you no lesser term could give you an idea of his case.”

Kate looked ready to be sympathetic.

Doubtless certain pronounced theological views of a warmly evangelical character held possession of his mind, and he was willing to be crowned with a martyr's crown sooner than yield one inch of ground ; perhaps even thirsted to suffer in what he believed to be a good cause. Well, however much she might differ from him, Kate could respect such constancy.

"A martyr to——" she said tentatively, leaving the majestic Rectoress (who somehow looked incomplete without her dolman) to fill in the pause.

"A martyr, Mrs. Granger, to indigestion!"

Kate almost gasped.

"The Rector does not know what it is to dispose of a meal in comfort."

"That's true," said Melissa, leaning her head against the back of her high chair and half closing her eyes. "Poor pa!"

Kate felt that more was meant than met the ear, and prudently refrained from looking at the young lady.

"The gastric juices, my dear Mrs. Granger, are absolutely inadequate."

Kate felt as though she were in a delicate and complex situation. She appeared to be involuntarily intruding into the most sacred recesses of the good Rector's being. She was also not unconscious of the humorous side of affairs, and painfully conscious of the twinkle in Melissa's sleepy, half-closed eyes.

"It is very sad," she said at a venture, commiserating the individual whose gastric juices so radically failed in what might have been expected of them, but still feeling that the Rector might hardly like their being discussed.

"It is indeed," said Mrs. Sweetapple ; "it is appalling : I tremble to think what might happen if Mr. Sweetapple had not me continually by his side. I watch him unceasingly," continued the lady, with a relentless air. "I supervise every mouthful."

"I think pa would be a lot better if he ate what he pleased," put in Melissa, tilting her chair, which had rockers, outrageously

out of the perpendicular, and looking with narrowed eyes at the tips of her neat black shoes, "and he thinks so too."

"Melissa!" cried her mother, turning the *pince-nez* full upon her, and striving madly but vainly to focus the dreamy-looking eyes. Fierce looks were but ammunition wasted upon such an evasive enemy. Melissa was wise in her generation.

"Ma," she said, as if waking suddenly out of a trance, "where's the Rev. Caleb Bud?"

Mrs. Sweetapple's face lighted up suddenly, like a street lamp when the lamplighter applies his slender torch.

"Ah, naughty one!" she said, with her head on one side, and a grim roguishness of demeanour; then turning to Kate: "I have not told you about our visitor—but he will be here soon."

Kate tried to look as though she could with difficulty possess her soul with patience, until the moment of meeting should arrive.

Above all things she dreaded a return to the gastric juices.

"He is the most interesting creature," continued Mrs. Sweetapple, turning up her eyes to the ceiling, as though she feared the being in question had already taken flight heavenwards, "and so made much of, and sought after, that we ought to feel ourselves highly privileged indeed that he can stay with us so long. He has just been presented to a living by Lord Scamper."

"Lord Scamper is the one who swears so horribly when he is out with the hounds," said Melissa, calmly watching a "painted lady" that had fluttered into the room, and was perched with quivering wings upon a pot of scented musk. What could you do with Melissa when she seemed to be talking to the butterfly all the while?

Happily, perhaps, all further discussion as to his lordship's delinquencies was rendered impossible by the entrance of Mrs. Sweetapple's "very interesting visitor," a newly-fledged curate, so painfully conscious of himself that he appeared scarcely able to find time to realise the existence of anyone else.

He was excessively tall, and excessively thin, had a long, smooth face, pale reddish hair, and he blinked his eyes when he spoke.

Mrs. Sweetapple was effusive and spasmodic.

"Allow me, my dear Mrs. Granger," she said, "to introduce to you our friend, the Rev. Caleb Bud."

Then, as Kate bowed, and the reverend gentleman performed a sort of stiff salaam, at the same time rubbing his somewhat red and choppy hands nervously together, she turned with an arch glance at Melissa, who was apparently half asleep.

"You have been missed," she said, "I can tell you, Mr. Bud; but I must not make you too vain—that would never do. What would Lady Scamper say?"

Mr. Bud simpered foolishly, as who should say he felt his position in her ladyship's regard to be too secure to be easily shaken.

As to Melissa, she watched Mr. Bud, as a cat watches a mouse, through narrowed eyes, taking him in, as it were, and enjoying him thoroughly. There was an intense love of humour in Melissa, and many a laugh brightened the dingy old study at the Rectory when she let the fun that was in her run over and made the Rector chuckle at his books.

Just as she had finished her survey the servant announced two neat-looking young ladies, daughters of a neighbouring Squire, and Mrs. Sweetapple suggested an adjournment to the garden. Fate placed the Rev. Caleb between Kate and Melissa.

"Are you fond of tennis, Mr. Bud?" said the former with polite intent.

"I should not allow myself to be fond of any mere amusement," replied Mr. Bud, with a gently reproachful air. "This garb," with a comprehensive gesture that cleverly included all the habiliments of his outer man, "must naturally stand in the way of my devoting much time to mere pastimes. I stand in a very responsible position, Mrs. Granger. I am just presented to the living of Great Gadsby by the patron, my Lord Scamper."

" You must feel rather ashamed of the position," suggested Kate sharply, more zealous than discreet, it must be owned.

He turned his weak-sighted eyes upon her with a horrified stare.

" Ashamed ! " he said.

Melissa's eyes twinkled like stars at night. She felt like a child at a theatre when the curtain is about to ring up.

" Why, how long have you been in orders ? " went on Kate unabashed, and with a certain high carriage of the head that never boded any good.

" Nearly three years," replied Mr. Bud, joining his hands finger to finger.

" And you can think of the hundreds of men who have grown grey in the service of the Church—men who have toiled for years in crowded parishes—who have worn themselves out in their work for God—have seen their children——"

The abject amaze in Mr. Bud's face stopped Kate in mid-career ; and, as she was silent, the amaze turned to a hurt displeasure.

" My Bishop approves—Lord Scamper has been most kind," he stammered, settling his long neck in his stiff round collar.

It was really very hard on Mr. Bud. He had been made so much of, set up, indeed, upon a kind of moral pinnacle ever since he was nominated to the excellent living of Great Gadsby. His own family in particular had made quite a young sort of Pope of him : and now, to have things put in such an unpleasant light : to be spoken of as if he were an interloper filling the place of some better man. . . .

The Rev. Caleb Bud's face was a sight to see.

" His lordship has known me from a boy," he said, rumpling up his lank locks, and showing grievous signs of distress ; " our families have been connected. He had a great regard for my father."

" You are very modest in giving us such reasons for his presenting you to the Vicarage of Great Gadsby ; but nothing makes any difference to what I think about it," said impulsive

Kate—"nothing! What would be said in the army if a subaltern were put over the heads of veterans who had seen long and arduous service?"

"It's lovely to hear you talk!" put in Melissa, sparkling all over with delight—"just lovely!"

This to Kate was like a sudden pull on the curb to a young horse. Hitherto she had been carried away by her own honest indignation. She had been absolutely free from self-consciousness. Now she realised that she had been led on to say more than was meet. With her, to realise that she had been wrong was to own to it.

"I beg your pardon," she said, turning a rose-flushed face to the bewildered young divine; "I have said too much."

"Not a word!" sighed Melissa, gazing dreamily ahead.

Happily at this juncture they reached the tennis-ground. A young soldier at home with his people "on leave" joined them, John and the Rector came down a side-walk, and a set was soon formed.

Was there ever such tennis-playing as Melissa's?

She turned, and swayed, and twisted like a young eel; the ball seemed to fly to her racket more than her racket to the ball. She poised the implement lightly in her hand, and the ball struck it and rebounded. Her countless gofferings whirled and swung till she seemed to be an Undine swathed in mist.

John Granger, too, played remarkably well; opposed to each other, they made play worth watching. The Rector chuckled, all radiant for once. The soldier on leave was almost culpably inattentive to his own play. The Rev. Caleb Bud forgot his "garb," and grew as much excited as he used to do as a healthy-bodied, healthy-minded boy on his school cricket-field, when the crack bat of the team was mightily smiting the ball to the boundary, and for the nonce Caleb was himself again, and a much nicer "self" than the long-coated, stiff-collared prig we have hitherto seen, with all the spontaneity and all the manhood starched out of him. He was actually falling

into the mundane proceeding of applauding vehemently, when Mrs. Sweetapple came to his elbow, and, as the fabled toad in the ear of Eve, whispered poison that spoiled his joy.

"Melissa plays well—does she not?" said the proud mother, looking more complete now she had slipped on her dolman; "and she does not stop at that sort of thing, Mr. Bud. She is as good as a Curate to her father in the parish."

The whisper was insidious, but Melissa heard, and missed a ball, and the opposite camp taking advantage of the slip, made a point, and brought the set to a conclusion.

Flushed, indignant, defiant, she stood before the Rev. Caleb Bud like a vision.

"I *hate* parish work," she said, panting; "I only do it to please my dear old dad. I would do anything to please him. There can never be anyone in the world I would do as much for."

Mrs. Sweetapple might have thought, with that fellow feeling that makes us wondrous kind, of the mouse whose best-laid schemes "gang aft agley."

Her match-making seemed doomed to a similar fate, for the terror expressed in Mr. Bud's face as he gazed on that vision of goffered frills, scintillating eyes, and curling lip, had in it, assuredly, naught akin to love.

Kate, feeling a little tired, had refused to play, which the Squire's daughters thought very sweet of her, and quite what a young married woman ought to do when there were girls present. They were much interested in her, feeling that her marriage was romantic, her position unlike other people's, and before the sets were over had half made up their minds to get mamma to call upon her.

The Rectory drawing-room was a pleasant place in summer, though apt to be somewhat draughty in winter. It had a French-window opening into the garden, and over this Melissa and the wizened boy—who, it will be remembered, was gardener and general factotum at Mr. Sweetapple's—had cleverly enough rigged up a sort of awning. Inside flowers blossomed everywhere, and Melissa presided at the tea-table.

The Rector was, for him, in great spirits as the company gathered round, but alas ! his little day of joy was doomed to fade.

Melissa had been recently on a visit to an aunt in London, and had there acquired what the Rectory general servant was pleased to describe as "high notions about sandwiches," the result of which notions appeared on the present occasion in the form of delicate slips of bread and butter, enclosing transparent sections of cucumber. The Rector established himself near Kate, handed her this, as he expressed it, "new-fangled dish," and then helped himself to a slender portion, beginning to chat to her of a subject very near his heart, the cottage homes of his village people.

The buzz of conversation was general ; the young soldier lounged outside the awning at the feet of the Squire's daughters, delighting them with stories, not of foreign lands—that experience was yet to come, for he was, after all, but a sucking warrior—but of Chatham, and the various delights—all so new to him—of garrison life.

The salutary skeleton at the feast was represented by the Vicar-designate of Great Gadsby, who ate plain bread and butter to mortify his flesh. He was explaining to John how once, at a parish party, he had taken sugar in his tea, "forgetting it was Lent," adding, "How culpably forgetful we are all apt to be at times !" To this John replied, "Quite so," and was congratulating himself that his abiding city was not at Great Gadsby, when all these various conversational streams were dominated by the shrill voice of Mrs. Sweetapple.

"Rector, Rector, you *don't* mean to say you are touching cucumber ! If you have no consideration for yourself, have some for me. Just think of the night I shall have with you after such an indiscretion !"

An awful pause succeeded this domestic tirade. The company appeared literally struck dumb, while the Rector dropped *his cucumber sandwich* as if it had been a hot potato, muttering *in a guilty manner* :

"Certainly not, my dear—certainly not! By no manner of means! Your wish, my dear, is law!"

Then gradually, one by one, like ducks playing "follow my leader," people began to speak. The Rector recovered himself and began to nibble a griddle-cake, casting little anxious glances at his spouse as who should say: "This is surely an innocent viand; let me continue it in peace, I pray."

At that particular moment he need have had no fear.

Mrs. Sweetapple was preparing for a great social effect. She was a woman who had a way of obtaining information by the direct method, and in this particular case she wished to obtain it publicly, in order to "impress" the public gathered round her.

She gave a loud "Ahem!" as though a crumb of the cucumber sandwiches were sticking in her throat, and everyone naturally looked up.

"When are you and Mr. Granger going to the Whimperdales?" she said, addressing Kate in a marked manner, and in a voice that "carried" to the furthermost corners of the room and indeed out across the lawn.

The Rev. Caleb Bud looked up aggrievedly. There was but one Lord (Scamper), and he (Caleb Bud) was his prophet.

Why, therefore, should Mrs. John Granger, a most unpleasantly outspoken person, about whom everybody appeared to make a quite unnecessary fuss, set up a Whimperdale acquaintance and try to glorify herself thereby?

As to the Squire's daughters, their faces were a study.

Here had they been making up their minds to get "mamma" to patronise young Mrs. Granger (a person really holding a very equivocal position), and lo and behold! the person who was thus to have "greatness thrust upon her" appeared to be on visiting terms at Steadly Hall.

Kate was, however, the most surprised of all. Her great grave eyes looked up wonderingly at Mrs. Sweetapple's eager face. It was a new amaze to her to realize that anyone could think it in any way remarkable that she should be going to

visit Lady Whimperdale. It offended her sense of the fitness of things that she should be questioned in so brusque a manner about her own and John's proceedings.

"I believe we go there on Friday," she said with a sedately quiet manner. Then she turned to her neighbour, the young soldier, and gave all her attention to his account of a new and exquisite booby-trap he and another fellow had set—most successfully too—for a newly-joined brother officer, that is, one more newly-joined than himself.

Under ordinary circumstances the booby-trap would not have interested Kate deeply; as it was, she was really grateful to it.

Mrs. Sweetapple was perfectly conscious that she had made herself unpleasant to a guest. She knew that the Rector's eye was on her with an expression she did not like. The Rector would stand infinite petty tyranny as to his food, and endless unpleasant references to his gastric juices, but he could put his foot down on occasion, and he had a great horror of a guest under his roof being made uncomfortable.

Mrs. Sweetapple, had however, the courage of her resolves.

"Have the Charlton-Medways left the Hall yet?" she said, still addressing Kate pointedly.

"I did not ask."

"My wife is not at all a curious person," put in John, strolling up to the side of the hostess, and coming to the rescue.

"No more am I," answered Mrs. Sweetapple, drawing the dolman round her with an air as if it were a toga, and she a Roman of distinction; "but in the case of a celebrity like Mr. Charlton-Medway, a little curiosity is pardonable. I met dear Lady Whimperdale just at the farm gate, and should have asked about her distinguished visitors, but that I was pressed for time."

At this a covert grin might have been detected on the faces of the Squire's daughters; and even Kate, still deeply interested in booby-traps and their skilful construction, felt her lips give at the corners.

"Lady Whimperdale must have paid you quite a long visit," continued Mrs. Sweetapple, unabashed, though conscious of an atmosphere of hostility about her, "for she had the pony-trap put up at the Arms."

"She sat a long time with my—mother," said Kate, now fairly roused, lifting her head high, her brown eyes bright and defiant. "No one can wonder at that, you know; it is always hard to leave her."

John felt a mist rise between him and the picture that he made believe to look at. His heart leapt and beat thickly for a moment.

Kate—his own sweet Kate—how lovely she was, doing battle for her husband's people! He would like to have taken her in his arms there and then, and kissed the quiver from her mouth.

"Y—e—s," said Mrs. Sweetapple, with her head sentimentally on one side, "Mrs. Granger is of course a very interesting person—we must all feel that; and Lady Whimperdale is so good and kind to the sick. I think she is one of the most perfect of women! And really, to see her in her own home circle——"

"When did we see her like that, ma?" put in Melissa, coming in from the lawn, and poising herself like a bird by the table, teacup in hand.

Mrs. Sweetapple was apparently deaf on that side.

"Indeed," she went on glibly, "in every relation of life she is admirable; and but for the Rector's dislike to our keeping dinner company——"

"We can't afford it," said Melissa, smiling in her sleepy way; "it's hard enough to pay the boys' schooling as it is, isn't it, pa?"

"Yes, yes, my dear," said the Rector, guiltily shoving a bit of muffin he had taken under the edge of his saucer. "But, God bless them! we'll always manage that, whatever comes or goes. And things will be easier now, for Lord Whimperdale wants me to have his young grandson here to read classics

with me, just like your young brother Humbie used to do, John. I think I ought to have been a schoolmaster, I am so fond of teaching boys," he went on, taking the company, as it were, into his simple confidence.

As for his spouse, she felt that, indeed, her social star was under eclipse, and should know no perihelion that afternoon.

Some more tennis, and then the little gathering began to melt away.

The Rev. the Vicar-designate of Great Gadsby murmured something about having to meet Lord Scamper, and the Rector somewhat sped the parting guest, begging him not to hurry back to Low Cross, but to be sure and suit his lordship's convenience.

"Mr. Bud leaves us the day after to-morrow, he has so much that is important to see to before entering upon his new position ; indeed, he says he fears he shall have to begin with the A B C of everything in the parish, such ignorance prevails."

"That will be rather uncomfortable for his parishioners, won't it ?" said John, addressing the Rector.

"He is a very foolish young man," answered Mr. Sweetapple ; "but it is the head, not the heart that is at fault. His orders have got into his head."

"And his 'garb,' pa," said Melissa, with a delicious reproduction of Mr. Bud's gesture of a while back ; "don't forget his garb !"

"As I told him only yesterday," said Mrs. Sweetapple, with an engaging smile, "there is nothing that can be such a help to the Vicar of a new parish as a thoroughly helpful wife."

But at this such a look came into Melissa's now widely-opened eyes, that even Mrs. Sweetapple was scared.

"What he wants is common-sense, not a wife," said the Rector ; "but he will mend with time. As it is, he'll be better than his ideas of himself, and I wish him well. I knew his father, and am interested in the lad."

What Mr. Bud's feelings would have been could he have

heard himself described as "the lad," it is given to no man to know. Happily he was absent. Many of us have to be thankful for the fact that we are spared the hearing of what is said of us behind our backs, and of these Mr. Bud was one.

Kate stayed chatting with Melissa awhile, after the other guests had gone, and the Rector retreated with John to his "study," a sort of cupboard, with a window abutting on the back garden, and giving a wonderful view of cabbages and gooseberry trees. Yet, humble as it was, this simple chamber was a sort of sanctuary to Mr. Sweetapple. There he could hear Mrs. Sweetapple's ringing "How are you?" addressed to some casual visitor, slip the bolt of the old worm-eaten lock, and feel safe and happy. With preternatural shrewdness he had established it as "a custom," that when he went out he locked his sanctum and put the key in his pocket. The fact then that the door of his study was locked had come to be taken as a sort of "not at home," and the one little deception he permitted himself was to allow the unwary upon occasion to mistake the slipped bolt for the turned lock. Three sides of the Rector's "den" were books—place only being left for a small asbestos stove, a pet plaything with him, and in truth a handy little contrivance enough.

Books were his best companions; over a new book he would rejoice as a mother over her new-born babe. In this he was happy, for a love of books and their sweet, though silent companionship, lifts all of us above the petty, carking cares of life, letting our spirits fly forth into the pure air that is nighest heaven, as a lark on the wing floats skyward.

When the boys came home for the holidays, they rather shirked this little hidden chamber. They found it was no manner of use indulging in fables as to their work and progress. They felt that they were (metaphorically) stripped bare in that den, with its little arched window, and the dark leather chair in which was seated the grand inquisitor.

Melissa floated in sometimes, as a butterfly might have

done. She would kiss the bald spot on the top of the Rector's head, perch on his knee, tell him some droll story to make him smile, and then float out again.

On one memorable occasion she had surprised him bending over a newly-opened document, and noted a tear trickling slowly down his dear old nose. She found the paper that had thus moved him was a term's report from the head master of "the boys'" school. It recorded how the younger of the two had been "incorrigibly idle" over his work.

No one ever knew what took place in a subsequent interview between Melissa and that boy. All that the rest of the family was aware of was the fact that he came out of it very limp and tearful, and worked like a slave the term following, so that masters and comrades alike wondered at him. Also, he remarked to his elder brother in private, that the "chap that got Melissa would catch a tartar—blessed if he wouldn't!"

But we are leaving John and Kate lingering at the Rectory too long.

As they started on their way home the dusk of the autumn evening had begun to gather. The light in the distance was silvery and uncertain, and, where the cornfields had been shorn of their golden load, the faint mist crept along the stubble.

Stars shone faint in the grey-blue sky, a pink flush was in the east, and as they reached the babbling brook they stopped instinctively, so beautiful was the scene around them.

There is a mysterious influence that Nature in her loveliest and most seductive moods brings to bear upon the soul of man. So intense is our sense of her sacredness and beauty that we are hushed, as though our steps were treading the aisles of some holy fane.

As John and Kate—still but wedded lovers—lingered by the brook, well might their hearts be touched and their souls hushed by the scene around them.

So clear was the water at their feet that each reed and sedge, each purple spire of loosestrife, had its duplicate sleeping at its feet. The water-ranunculus floating on the quiet

stream ; the starry, purple-eyed prunella ; the tiny earthnut, like a miniature sweet pea ; the tapering bugle plant, so richly blue—how fair these flowerets were !

Half-way up the hill on one side was a field of poppies, ruddy, rich, resplendent—an eyesore maybe to the farmers, but exquisite in its gorgeous loveliness, and glowing like a gigantic ruby in the grey-light of evening.

Overhead the swallows were flocking for flight ; innumerable wings flitted and swirled against the faint and fading sky ; sometimes they dipped so low, Kate felt as if she could touch them with her hand ; anon they wheeled, far and high, crossing and recrossing each other, and keeping up such a busy, happy chattering as filled all the air, and almost drowned the soft low whisper of the wind in the thick-growing sedges. Not quite, though ; and, as she stood there with her arm close pressed in John's, that rustling voice seemed to Kate to speak to her heart of hearts. How different a place the world had seemed to her since the day when first she began to love this man who was now her husband !

How the colours in life's landscape had deepened and brightened ! How the "music of violins" had swept over her soul, and bidden it wake to the thrill of passion and the tenderness of longing. How she had learnt the lesson of possessing a dearer self, a creature whose suffering, even in the slightest thing, would be infinitely harder to bear than any possible pain that could come to herself !

It is impossible to account for these waves of exquisite delight and tenderness that will, at times, sweep across a heart that loves. They are like the wind, coming whence we know not, not to be seen by any mortal eye, yet swaying the little flowers with a tender buffeting kiss, and bringing us the scent of the hayfields from afar.

As these two lingered, drinking in all the sweet, dear sights and sounds that make up Nature's evensong, a tiny water-wagtail came wavering down to the brook to drink.

They stood in the shadow of a tree, and so he came on

bravely, balancing himself delicately on a mossy stone, almost at their feet, dipping his slender beak into the ripples at the edge of the stream, fluttering this way and that after some tiniest insect, then drinking again, fluttering his dark slim wings, and preening his gleaming breast.

"He did not see us," said Kate, smiling up into John's face as the bird flitted to the bushes on the opposite bank; "it was lovely watching him like that!"

It was all lovely, thought John, his wife's face loveliest of all, with that holy radiance, that deep and tender gaze, in her dear eyes, and the happy little bird drinking at the brook was part and parcel of the whole.

"John," said Kate, as they resumed their homeward way, "did I say too much? Did I speak too hotly to-day? Dear, I know I do so often; I am too impulsive—I speak without thinking. When I see a thing wrong I feel as if I must try to set it right. Will you always tell me when I let myself go too much?"

He promised; he said the injustice to others—hard-working, perhaps hopeless men in the Church—of such a case as Mr. Bud's, was enough to move any heart to righteous anger, enough to make the Church's enemies blaspheme; he did not wonder at what she had said.

But he felt himself half guilty all the while, for, if Kate said too much (and his love was not of that senseless kind that blinds a man to all faults and failings in the one beloved), was not he, John Granger, often conscious that he erred in just the opposite extreme?

If he should blame Kate for words too hot and scathing, might not she—poor Kate!—blame him for a silence still more culpable?

She was soothed by his words. There was sweetness in appealing to him for counsel. She was happy—very, very happy—as she walked with her love through the star-gemmed gloaming.

When they reached the farm they went into the house-place thinking to find someone there.

But the room was empty.

The grey light flittered through the casement, where the leaves of the creepers outside showed like a study in black and white. One window was set back, and through it came the sound of the three bell-voices dropping from the darkening sky.

Weary with his own emotions John sank into the wide old settle by the window, and Kate, dropping on her knees, nestling to his arms, laid her head against his breast.

His lips groped for hers.

“Love—my love!” he muttered softly, and she put up her hand to his face, touching it gently. He longed to say, thus holding her close and fast to his heart: “Forgive me—oh, forgive me, love of mine!” But he dared not. It was one of those moments in which those who love are conscious of the full joy of life; the passionate intensity of content; the deep thrill of a sympathy unique and penetrating. He would drink his fill of its sweetness. He would not spoil it by a word; he dared not; it was too great a gift.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT MATTHEW GOLDSTRAW HAD TO SAY.

WE are told that "some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them."

Matthew Goldstraw was one of those who have greatness thrust upon them. He felt the burden and the responsibility acutely. It had been an onerous task enough to drive to Wiffle, that centre of fashion and stir, to meet Mr. John's bride from London town. The furbishing up of himself and the keen mare on that occasion had been a long and tedious ceremony.

"Hoo moight ha' seen hersel' i' her own soides if hoo'd turnt her yed round," said he, describing the condition of the mare to a select audience at "The Whimperdale Arms," "that hoo moight."

But what was driving to Wiffle, after all, to compare with driving Mrs. John to join the sportsmen from Steadly Hall? Of what count were the station-master and his wife and his dahlias set beside the very cream and the best of the county quality, including Lord Whimperdale himself, a known judge of horseflesh?

Thus ran the agitated current of Matthew Goldstraw's thoughts once he knew what was expected of him.

John Granger had betaken himself to the Hall the night previous in order to be ready to go out with the shooting party early in the morning. Right loth had he been to leave *his Bonnie Kate*, but Kate was imperious. A burning head-

ache, too violent to be disregarded, had to be given in to, solitude and rest were the only remedies.

Happy indeed were the twins left in charge of their fairy Princess. They sat side by side on the stairs, like two pigeons on a rail, outside her bedroom door, to see that no one went in to disturb her as she slept. They packed all the pretty things that had to be stowed away in the box John took with him the day before, and looked on with awe-struck eyes at the indifferent fling with which the Whimperdale footman swung it up into the drag behind, as if the pink satin and black lace gown it contained were of no account whatever. They hoped that Mrs. Sweetapple might be passing along by the privet hedge and see the Hall drag at the door. They raced off to tell mother—what did they not run in to tell that patient listener day by day, and hour by hour—all about everything; how father had patted the horses and praised their glossy skins; how “fine” John had looked as he drove away; how bad poor Kate’s head was, and how quiet they were going to keep the house.

John was bound on a pleasant errand; a cosy dinner with a charming country-house party, a march through the dew-laden, diamond-spangled world of a sunny morning on the morrow, for the weather was perfect, as only autumn weather can be, bright, yet breezy, under white-flecked shining skies.

Yet it all lacked something for him, since it had not Kate, and he looked grave enough as he drove along, pondering on the possibility of a letter received that morning from Madeira having, it might be, something to say to that tight, burning pain over Kate’s brow.

The letter in itself was cheerful enough—in fact, almost spasmodically so—Aunt Cynthia revelling in descriptions of the General’s renewed health and strength; but inside was a tiny scrawl, rather faint and halting in execution, at once loving and yet with a sad ring about it.

“*This is to say God bless my Bonnie Kate—God bless her*

always and always—from her loving old uncle who is not up to writing much to-day."

It was in a wee envelope of its own, and had evidently not been sent by Aunt Cynthia.

Kate had not said much even to John after reading it, but she had looked pale and thoughtful, and in the middle of the night had awaked in a sweat of fear.

"I dreamt I saw a great shining river," she said, trembling, "and on it was a boat with a silver sail, drifting away I knew not whither. Uncle Anthony was there, leaning over towards me where I stood on the bank, and waving his hand to me, it seemed—oh, John!—in farewell. The silver light fell full upon his face—his dear, true, loving face."

After a night of such dreaming Kate was not likely to be good for much, and John felt how wise it was that she should stay behind and rest.

Yet he did not miss her the less for that. Any little separation from her only taught him more and more keenly how incomplete his life was without her, even any little fraction of it. He was puzzled sometimes to realise what it could have been before he ever knew her. He was ready to wonder how it was that some subtle intuition had not told him of her whereabouts—that once when she lay hovering between life and death he had not had some consciousness of such a crisis. He compared times and seasons, and found that at that very time he, John Granger, had been travelling abroad, enjoying a new and wider range of experiences than life had ever yet given him. Looking back there seemed a heartlessness in the idea—Kate fighting with death, he himself rioting in the fresh and unfamiliar beauties of Nature around him. He knew how illogical such notions were, and yet at times they possessed him.

He was not surprised at Lady Whimperdale's disappointment that he should arrive at Steadly alone. He felt a very *poor thing* without Kate, and told Lady Whimperdale in the

simplest way how she had insisted upon his coming, and how she was going to join the sportsmen at Beckley Cover in time for luncheon next day. Led on by the kindly face and sympathetic manner of his hostess, he told her also of that little note from the General, and how it jarred with Aunt Cynthia's ecstatic rejoicings over her brother's restored health. He even spoke of his own fears and misgivings, and of Kate's passionate attachment to General Pierrepont.

"From what my husband tells me, he was a man who called forth the intense devotion of those around him, even in his younger days ; indeed, it used to be said, when he was Colonel of the 197th, that his men would go through fire and water for him, and think nothing of it either."

The next morning dawned bright and dewy, and as John stepped briskly through the heather, that looked for all the world as though it were powdered with diamonds, his heart was light as his step. He was lucky with his gun ; the finest birds seemed to fall to him ; the other men of the party congratulated him on his "luck." His luck, he thought, meant that Kate was, even then, on her way through the hills and dales.

Nothing could be more characteristic of Kate than her determination that old Matthew should be her charioteer, the farm gig her chariot, to Beckley Cover. She was very glad to know Lady Whimperdale ; as for Lord Whimperdale, if he had known Uncle Anthony in the long ago, so much the better for him. But they should take her just as she was ; not only as General Pierrepont's niece, but as the woman who had married the son of Thomas Granger, of Low Cross Farm. She knew that Lady Whimperdale, with her refined culture and exquisite intuitions, understood all this just as well as she did herself ; understood also that, though strained and trying complications and relations must arise in such a position as hers, still John's wife was loyal to the core of her heart to John's people as well as to John himself. Whatever had gone wrong on the subject concerned John and herself

alone ; no one else in all the wide, wide world had anything to do with it, or to say to it. She was glad that the hour was near when she must start to join her husband again. The day and night had alike been lonely without him. Besides, she had reasoned herself into an entirely satisfactory explanation of the General's little note, and her spirits rose buoyantly in consequence. He missed her—missed her every hour—she who was always so much with him ; he did not like to say much about all this for fear of marring her new-found happiness, but it showed itself in the sadness and yearning underlying the little note. How foolish she had been not to think of this before ! Why, a baby might have seen through it !

Matthew, too, was happy as what he was pleased to call “the trap” drove to the door. Never had the keen mare looked sleeker ; never had he (Matthew) been conscious of being better groomed himself, or in better keeping with the mare. Since the death of his wife—for Matthew had lately become a widower—he had lived with his married daughter in a small rose-covered cottage “nigh the beck,” as folk were wont to describe its proximity to Low Cross brook ; and it had taken the entire household to carry out and complete his toilet on this important occasion. His lank hair was “sleeked” to such an extent that its shining rivalled the mare’s coat. His scarf had been tied over and over again by his young granddaughter, who was counted clever at such matters, and had to stand on a chair to execute her task, while her father held a small looking-glass, awkwardly enough, at such an angle as would enable Matthew to see what was going on, making a sort of hissing sound all the time as if a horse were being dressed down.

There was something very soothing to Matthew’s feelings in thus being the centre of attraction to his family circle. The children stopped eating their bread-and-butter to watch granddad being made so fine. The daughter ejaculated a wish that “mother hersel’ ” had been spared to see that day.

The dogs' skin gloves were not forgotten, but a process of cleaning to which they had been subjected at the cottage, by some well-meaning but inexperienced member of the family, had resulted in a certain limpness that detracted from their former jaunty effect. Yet it was with much self-complacency that Matthew mounted the high driving-seat of the gig.

Mrs. John, neatly dainty and beautiful in a marvellously-fitting costume of heather-cloth, with business-like-looking hat of the same adorned with a pheasant's wing, was tenderly assisted to the seat beside him by Humbie and the twins, while Aunt Libbie, grim and resentful, stood like some avenging spirit in the doorway. Jack, too, was of the party, his yellow-brown eyes wistful, his tail swinging slowly, as who should say, "I'm afraid I mayn't go; but, oh, if I only could—"

He made a spring forward as the keen mare capered, pranced a bit, and then set off in real earnest, but a word from Humbie held him back. Jack's ideas of sport were hardly orthodox enough to make his presence in the field desirable. Humbie felt proud, as he watched Kate down the lane and caught the last wave of her dainty hand, to see his brother's wife setting off to be amongst those who were her proper and fitting associates, and yet there was an ache at his heart too, and he fancied when he and Jack went into the mother's room that a tear had wet the cheek Kate's lips had newly kissed.

We are told there are spots on the sun, hence it need not be a subject of surprise that, resplendent a creature as was the keen mare, her disposition to those who knew her well showed certain flaws—in a word, at critical and unlooked-for moments she was given to shying. This tendency on her part was a sore point with Matthew Goldstraw, although, having a poor, not to say contemptuous, estimate of any London lady's knowledge of horse-flesh and equine ways generally, he felt himself equal to explaining matters away to Mrs. John, should any untoward incident occur on the way to Beckley Bottom.

And, indeed, he was shortly put upon his metal ; the mare displaying in full perfection her tendency to shying as they passed a gate, on the top rail of which a cow had seen fit to rest her patient face, mooing softly to herself as she surveyed the world around her.

"It's trying to bring the cow to a sense of her duty, she is, Mistress John," as the mare went suddenly sideways on all her four legs ; "she's a devil at trying to set the world to roights, that is she ; but she's no more vice in her than a choilt, and she'd no more kick than she'd tell you a lie, and I conna say no more than that. She conna abide a white-faced cow, neither, no ways, and I've often tould t' maister as he'd show a clear moind by buying them as is all a pleasant brown. Happy then t' mare 'ud be less full o' fads and fancies."

After this it appeared well to Matthew to direct Mrs. John's attention to other matters than the sensitive fastidiousness of Bess, the mare, in the matter of cows' faces.

He pointed with his whip to a crow, dead, and hung by the heels against the barn door.

"They say in these parts, marm, as a varmint like that is for ever preaching, though never a word passes his lips. Sorrow's the portion of him, Mrs. John, as Scripture hath it, for he's set as a beacon to warn many. Time was when he stalkit in his glory over the furrers and led the poor weorms a life of it, that did he ; but them days is past and gone for him the noo."

Here Matthew looked sideways at his companion to see if the keen mare's misdeeds were forgotten in the interest of the crow's sad fate.

Apparently he had won his point, for Kate's next remark was smilingly put, and no anxiety as to the mare's conduct in prospect seemed to oppress her.

"You have been a long time with the family, Matthew—a long time at the farm?"

"*Most ways*," replied the old man, "*seein'* I was no more to *look at* than yon young cockerel as sees to t' garden at

Maister Sweetapple's—I was no more to look at than that young jackanapes, and no good to ony mortal sort o' wark neither. I wur just the scram o' the earth. First scarecrow as ever I made to seare t' burrds off t' grain wur such a fule of a felly, as two finches went and builded a nest in 's hat, that did they, and went in and out by a hole i' t' soide, and reared a brood too. Eh, bo' they must ha' had mony a larf at t' young soft-head as he thought to froighten 'em wi' riggin' up a figger-head as wouldna ha' deceived a suckin' babby, so they must."

"But you have learnt a great deal since those days, Matthew?" said Kate gently.

"Larned?" he said, flicking the mare sharply in the energy of the moment and making her cut a caper. "I should say I had larned! Why, I werena fit fer much else than to drive coos. I wur an addle-head, and nothing but it," he continued, with unspeakable scorn of himself as he was in those far-off and unripe years. "I come to t' fam'ly fust wi t' maister's fayther—a gran' man as ever stepped i' shoe-leather, an' a stern. He larned me a lot, he did; I grew into a likely chap, Mistress John, I can tell yo', an' I wur a lot thought on by t' quality. I mind Maister Sweetapple fust comin' here. He wur slape as a foumart, and blithe as a bee, that wur he. There weren't no mistress at t' Rectory them days, yo' see."

Here Matthew was taken with a tiresome cough, and had to look to his whip-lash, that had got somehow twisted and entangled. This little matter set to rights, he took up his parable again, only wishing that all his family, more especially his married daughter, who was somewhat given to hold him cheap, could see him talking "so comfor'ble" with a born London lady like Mistress John. He felt emboldened to pursue the subject of Mr. Sweetapple's advent among the good people of Low Cross.

"Yo' see he'd a baddish time, had Maister Sweetapple, firstways, as yo' may say—fer him as was afore him was a *gran' man*, and t' people thought a lot of him. He'd tell o'

t' joys of heaven, till 't wur as good as going to see a firework show to hark to him, and he was sound as sound on t' heathens, and where they'd be bound to go fust and last, every man and mother's son of 'em. It did yo' rale good to hear him, for it made yo' feel what it was to be a Christian. I canna say as folk felt confident Maister Sweetapple wur the same thorough-goin' soart of a felly. He wasna counted as outspoken as he moight be, but happen he wur young and timorous, and lacked t' grit to say as all them dratted heathen were bound straight on t' lake o' fire and brimstone, and no way out on't. It makes yo' feel comfor'ble and at peace wi' yersel' to have these things laid down plain and straight, and no hedging, as one may say ; fer what manner of use is it to *be* a Christian at all, and lead a Christian life, if them slow-bellies, wi' little or no clothes to cover them, from all I hear, is to gang t' same gate as we ? It were a hard matter to Low Cross, I can tell ye, at fust to put up wi' Maister Sweetapple's ways and sayin's, but he wur mighty tender to t' sick and sorrowful, he wur that, and that catched hold on t' women-folk, and t' men-folk follered, as they mostwise do—as they mostwise do. Then we heerd as he'd worked hisself nigh to death at a place in what they call the Black Country, an' that fetched us a deal."

Kate felt that the path of wisdom lay in refraining from entering into theological depths with Matthew. After a decent interval, she was fain to remark upon the beauty of the day.

How fair—how fair it was ! The faint, green distance, dappled with infinitesimal snow-white sheep, so small from being so far off that they looked as if they ought to be put into a box at night, and the lilliputian trees laid alongside them ; on the other side a purple flush that told of heather shining in the sun, and larch trees, tall and tapering, with the rich golden light flittering through their branches, and hanging them with emeralds wherever a dewdrop lingered.

"Ay," said Matthew, with an air of great self-satisfaction, "*it's a gran' country, an' Low Cross be's a gran' place—I*

reckon there ain't such another nowheres. It's a gran' thing for yo' to have seen Low Cross, marm, anyway." Here the little troublesome cough beset the old man again ; but he overcame it and went on : " And as for the family, where be their like? Yo' seeè, if I speak free, Mrs. John, yo' must pardon me, for I've knowed 'em from the fust, as yo' may say. I mind Humbie when he took his fust step, and a' t' lot of us was called to see him at it. The mistress, 'count o' bein' a bit poorly like, wur laid along the sofy, and a' the rest on us gathered round. We wur rare fain to see t' missis so pleased, but for a' that we wur feart, an' darena say what wur in our 'arts, for we knowed by then as Humbie wur na like other childer. It seems a long cry to look back to now, and Maister John grow'd such a gentleman and much thought on, as I hear, i' Lunnon city ; but he wur only a laddie them days—only a laddie—but such a helpful kind o' young cratur as never I seed, an' a soart o' right hand—ay, an' left too—to the mistress—hoo bein' a bit poorly. He'd fetch and carry for her like a dog, and he'd watch over little Humbie same as if he wur a woman. I mind once a boy—a bold, bad limb of a chap as ever strutted i' the street—called after him and Humbie. 'Tak' whoam yer hump-back ! ' says he, standin' straddle, wi' 's tongue out ; and Maister John he just cuddled up t' little lad, and tuk him whoam swift and tender, and then, back he come, wi' 's eyes shinin' like stars, an' 'is fists doubled up business-fashion, and of all the drubbins—well, well," said Matthew, flicking a fly off the mare's haunches, " I do run on—same as a clock wi'out a pendulum. I be wearyin' yo', Mistress John ? "

But there was no weariness in the face turned towards the garrulous old man, only a quiver about the lips, and a dewy brightness about the eyes.

" I'm glad John thrashed that boy," she said, the colour flushing up her cheek, so that her beauty dazzled even Matthew Goldstraw ; " same as the sunlight glinting on Low Cross brook," *as he described it subsequently to his daughter.*

It was sweet to Kate to hear of her husband's manliness and daring, though perhaps she could hardly have put into words the reason that made so simple a thing a source of such pleasure ; she would have shrunk from allowing, even to herself, that she revelled in John being, as it were, reinstated in her own mind—redeemed from the slur of weakness in his wife's eyes. How sweet the vision of the boy with flaming eyes and doubled-up fists, taking up the cudgels for his weakly little brother !

" I'll not gainsay it, Mistress John," continued old Matthew, looking upon himself as a distinct social success in the matter of his conversational powers on the present occasion ; " I'll not gainsay it, but what more than one at The Arms has said as yo'd got a proud look wi' yo'—and then, says I, up and ready, 'Proud, mates ? Why, what woman wouldna be proud as owns sich a mon as our Maister John ?' They all know him, bless you, weel enoo—they all know how he set out i' the could and the snow when little Polly Stevens got lost on the moors—ay, an fun' her too—and tuk off 's warm coat, and wrappit her in it and carried her in 's arms same as a babby, and laid her on the mither's lap—and how the woman ketched him, and clipped him round the neck and kissed him, sobbin' and cryin' like a mad creetur."

It frightened Matthew a good deal to see that Mrs. John's eyes were wet by this time, so he hastened to descant upon the wondrous healthiness of Low Cross and the surrounding neighbourhood, and how the doctors " went lean," because the people got well of themselves.

" There was one felly they thought was a case, and had a fancy to mak' a belly-full over him, but he cured hisself. He'd been too often and too long at a time at t' Arms, and he began to fancy every mack o' thing, argyfyin' wi' his mates as there were a snake up t' sleeve o' 's coat, and screeching like a pig wi' a knife in 's throat, so last of all he fancied he saw a lot o' rats runnin' out at him, and after that a mort o' big cats, and t' cats eat t' rats ; and that cured him. No more

beasts came anigh him, neither doctors nor owt else, and he larned sense too, and stayed whoam three nights a week wi' t' missus and t' childer."

"I'm glad of that," said Kate, who had listened to this narrative with becoming gravity; then a glance at the deep crape band on Matthew's hat suggested to her the fact that all inhabitants of Low Cross did not succeed in curing themselves and keeping the doctors lean.

"I am sorry to know, Matthew," she said softly, "that you have had a heavy trouble lately."

Matthew puckered up his old face till it looked like a long-kept ribstone pippin.

"Well, I canna reetly say," he said at last, shaking his head in a meditative manner, and admonishing the keen mare that she must trot and not canter when between the shafts. "Betsey Jane had got very troublesome of late; she'd got very troublesome of late, had Betsey Jane. We was 'most wore out wi' her ways afore she went—'most wore out, all the lot on us."

This was such a very unexpected view of his late bereavement, that Kate felt fairly non-plussed. Happily he was too much absorbed in his own cogitations to notice her embarrassment, and went dryly on with his story, without waiting for any comment on her part.

"She wur a terrible one to thrape, wur Betsey Jane, at all times. It wur thrape all day, so as a man's vittles wur bound to lay heavy on his stomach; and thrape all neet as long as ony fule would lie awake to hark 'till her. Eh! bo' a man canna thrive wi' a thrapping woman anigh him; and I'm greatly feared as when my time comes they'll lay me alongside Betsey Jane, and fust thing on the resurrection morn there she'll be a settin' oop i' her coffin and thrapin' away the old gate."

Matthew turned and looked at Kate with a sad wistfulness in his blear old eyes; his fears might be ludicrous, but they were very real.

"Hoo' had t' gift o' tongues, same as them of old, had

Betsey Jane," he said grimly. "One tongue—same as other folk—don't express Betsey Jane, nor come anigh her. I've had trials, Mrs. John, i' my toime. I've had boys under me for to help, as 'ud bring the tools to me, and me mendin' sheds and such like, that blunt, marm, saving your presence, as yo' moight set on 'em, and be none the worse. I've 'ad trials by land, when twitchgrass got in among my rigs ; and trials by sea, when t' floods came and t' brook rose up like a giant refreshed wi' new wine, as t' Scripter hath it, and made my garden-beds as things o' nought ; but I've never had no trial to equal Betsey Jane's tongue. I've throve kindly since the Lord tuk her—and I've ate my bits o' vittles wi' a relish, and had peace o' nights, and I conna bring mesel' to tak' kindly to the notion o' seein' Betsey Jane agen."

There was something wonderfully pathetic in the old line-drawn face which Matthew turned upon Kate as he spoke.

She felt she must try her hand at some clumsy comfort.

"I do not think you need look upon things in that way," she said, fully conscious of the ludicrous position in which she found herself, yet touched, too, by the old man's dilemma, and irresistibly drawn to try and comfort him ; "you know it says in the Bible that we shall all be changed."

"Ay, ay, so it do, so it do," he answered, with a wintry smile touching his face ; "that's t' best word o' comfort I've heerd on yet—'we shall all be changed,' and Betsey Jane along wi' t' rest. I'm reet glad as Betsey Jane 'ull be changed. Happen she'll have give up thrapin' at me."

"I think so, Matthew. I think she'll have forgotten everything else except how much she loved you, in spite of the—thraping."

"Mrs. John, you've a gradely way o' comfortin' folk as is troubled. God send if yer own day o' bitter sorrow comes, a good comforter may be anigh to you."

Words spoken in the rich sunlight of the autumn day, with *fair meadow* and purple moor all around—words to be remembered and called to mind in the cruel darkness of

desolation, with the wind moaning in the branches, and the sea of pain beating on the rocky shore of the inevitable.

"People are very happy in Low Cross, are they not, Matthew?" said Kate, after a long silence, during which the keen mare had gone perilously near shying at a staring white milestone, and Matthew had looked as unconscious of her tricks as possible.

"Oh ay ; they be simple folk, and simple folk is mostways happy, be'ant they? They've mighty great privileges, too, Mistress John. There's no finer ironstone pits all over England than ours, nor stouter men to work 'em, and t' Green 's as fine a place to stand about on Sundays, as ony mon could wish to set his foot on. Summer's evenin' there's the brook to fish in——"

"Do they catch much there?" said Kate.

"They ketch each other's lines, and there's plenty to do to disentangle 'em—and they breathe the fresh air o' heaven—and they pass the time away pleasant-wise—what more should they wish for? Says a south-country man to me onct : 'Do your folk like to be powdered o'er so yaller from t' pits?' 'Yes, they do,' says I. 'If a man's properly yaller he's in work, and well thought on—an' all t' village knows it. There's glory in it,' says I ; and he wur dumbfounded."

Kate was about to make some rejoinder when a sudden turn in the soft moorland road brought them in view of a scattered company of men and horses ; drags and a phaeton formed the background, footmen busy preparing luncheon on cloths spread upon the rustling, fragrant heather filled in the foreground.

"Here be we," said Matthew, and gave the keen mare such a fillip, at the same time reining her in tight, that she showed herself to the best advantage as the gig wheels turned off on to the heathery grass of Beckley Bottom.

Quickly was John Granger by the side of the vehicle, ready to hand his wife down, and greet her with a glad bright look that no one but Matthew saw.

And who is this dainty figure begirt from head to foot in

soft blue serge, her sleek head crowned with a piquant little cap of the same—who but Melissa, smiling and *débonnaire*, and not the least bit in the world sleepy !

“ I kept myself as a pleasant surprise,” said Melissa, looking ready to pirouette on the yielding turf beneath her feet; “ I trust that in this garb I find favour in your eyes, fair lady mine ? ”

The irresistibly comic way in which she said “ in this garb,” the delicate and subtle mimicry of Mr. Caleb Bud in the gesture accompanying it, overset Kate’s gravity entirely.

“ Hush ! ” said Melissa confidentially ; “ he is here. He is quite uncertain whether he ought to approve of the slaughter of partridges and the festival of September the First, but two lords banging away like anything are quite too much for him. He has come in Lady Scamper’s train, and follows her about like a spaniel. He is delicious, exceedingly. As I told him, if he has compunctions about ‘ *le sport* ’ being a Christian pastime, he can protest silently and effectually by refusing game each night at dinner.”

Lord Whimperdale coming up to greet Mrs. John at that moment, Melissa subsided, and Matthew Goldstraw felt that the one supreme moment of his life was come. He was even able to wish that Betsey Jane were there to see.

He had fancied he detected a lurking grin here and there on the faces of the “ skip-arounds ” in plush breeches and cockaded hats—doubtless at his “ audfarrand ” look and ways. But not a trace of a grin was to be seen as his lordship himself came up to the mare, patted her shining coat, and said :

“ The mare is in fine condition, Matthew.” (Oh yes, there could be no doubt at all about the matter ; he said “ Matthew ” as plain as plain.) “ And how’s the mistress to-day ? ”

“ Mistress Granger’s whiles and agen a bit poorly, your lordship, and she’s stayin’, restful-like, i’ the house to-day ; but the master’s well, and the rest of the fam’ly ; and I’m glad your lordship has a good mind to the mare.”

With this Matthew touched his hat, and pulled up one of

the dog-skin gloves to attract attention to those articles of his toilette. Then he was told that the gig would not be wanted any more, and set off home, fairly bursting with news—not the least of it the “fuss” Lady Whimperdale made over Mrs. John, “coming across the heather with her dress a-trailing like any Queen, and her two hands held out afore her, and such a smile upon her face as it made your eyes fair twinkle for to see.”

Needless to say that Matthew spent that evening at The Arms, where his short colloquy with Lord Whimperdale took the form of a long and well-sustained conversation—a matter which caused the greatest sensation among frequenters of the inn parlour, and conferred upon Matthew a sort of social halo ever after—an honour which he wore with wonderful dignity and condescension towards less-favoured mortals.

Meanwhile Kate was entering upon a real happy time. *Imprimis*, she was near John once more; within sound of his voice, of his ringing laugh—so sweet and musical for a man; she could note how well he was appreciated, how often Lady Whimperdale appealed to him on this point or that.

No self-shining is so sweet to a woman as to shine with the reflected light of being part and parcel of a man she loves, and Kate was very, very happy.

Then it was sweet to hear Lord Whimperdale talk of the General, and of the olden days when they had served their country together in the burning, glorious East—sweet to be near Lady Whimperdale, and feel the tie between them growing stronger and stronger. Melissa, too, was an element of pleasure.

“We had a lovely time last night,” was the first confidential remark this young creature made to her. “Your husband took me in to dinner, and we talked about you all the time. We’d never be tired of that, either of us, you know.”

Melissa was also immensely amusing. The witchery of her was evidently dazzling the dull little optics of the Vicar-designate of Great Gadsby, but he was puzzled as well as bewitched.

"Can you tell, Mrs. Granger, when Miss—er—Sweetapple means what she says?" he asked Kate, twisting his fingers the one in the other, and standing first on one foot and then on the other, like a contemplative flamingo.

"No," said Kate, laughing; "nor yet when she says what she means. I'd give it up if I were you."

"But she's such an interesting study," protested Mr. Bud; "and all men in this garb" (with the little downward gesture of the hands intended to include all his sombre attire) "ought surely to be, above everything else, students of human nature in all its varied forms."

"You'll need a dictionary, Mr. Bud, to help you to make a study of the Rector's daughter," said John, chiming in.

John was having a good time too. He was proud of Kate—Bonnie Kate—and her grace and beauty; proudest of all to note the love-light that lit up her eyes as they met his, even across all the length of the Steadly Hall drawing-room; proud, too, of her ready tongue and the ripple of her wit.

Kate was not a woman to be a nonentity in any society; but John thought he had never realised the power she had socially until he saw her among the house-party at Steadly Hall. John had never known the dear, "scrappy" Pierrepont household except when the shadow of sickness and suffering was over it; he had never, therefore, realised the full brilliancy and charm of the woman he had married, until now.

He heard old Lord Scamper—wavering about on spindleglegs that seemed almost to be clasping an imaginary saddle—ask his hostess to let him sit by "that delightful little woman in the pink gown," and was not without misgivings as to what the said delightful person might, under such circumstances, be lured on to say respecting that callow divine, the Vicar-designate of Great Gadsby. He saw the adoration Melissa lavished upon Kate; the deep regard Lady Whimperdale evidently felt for her; the chivalrous admiration of Lord Whimperdale himself. He heard the simple, unstrained, yet loyal way in which Kate spoke of his own people, and of life

at the farm, of Humbie's exquisite playing, and even of Jack's manifold perfections.

It was *couleur de rose*, it was such a happy, flawless time, that past fears and misgivings seemed to be buried fathoms deep beneath the waters of forgetfulness.

Like all times, happy or otherwise, it came to an end.

As Lady Whimperdale took leave of Kate, she held her by both hands, looked deep into the lovely stedfast eyes, bent and kissed the soft roseate cheek.

"My dear," she said, "I am sorry it is good-bye ; I shall often, often think of you."

There are those who mock at the friendship and the love that may exist between women.

Surely it must be that such have never known its calm sweetness, its holy tenderness and faith, its quiet, sustaining, helpful power in time of need.

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CHAPTER XII.

THE THREAD OF FATE.

WHICH of us have not, at one time or another in our lives, revelled in an atmosphere of light and perfume, strayed awhile in some "very pleasant places where the birds continually do sing, and flowers appear upon the earth," and then suddenly found ourselves facing a north-easter?

Kate came home from Steadly steeped in sunshine. It had been an altogether happy time, so sympathetic had been the atmosphere around her—sympathetic, that is, in a sense that might have been equally possible and perfect in the humblest place and amid the simplest surroundings, and had nothing in the world to do with the luxury and comfort of Lord Whimperdale's ancestral home. It was the people, not their station and surroundings, that had made her so happy. Melissa, too, had been quite a pleasant feature in the programme, and now kept them full of merriment and laughter as they all drove to Low Cross in the Steadly drag. The village reached, the Rector's daughter insisted upon being put down at the outer gate of the Rectory, and had her box deposited on the mossy turf by the roadway. This course of conduct was fully understood by John and his wife when, just as Lord Whimperdale touched the roans with ever so light a flick, a flying figure was seen coming down the sloping lawn—Mrs. Sweetapple, with streaming cap-strings, and displaying an agility wonderful for a woman of her years. Melissa also set off at a run, embracing her mother

with all the clinging tenderness of a young octopus, and held her there, in spite of an obvious struggle or two.

"How's pa?" she said; "and has kitty's leg-bone set all right? I've been so anxious about the poor little beast."

Rapidly, rapidly was the Whimperdale drag disappearing round the corner. Kate waved her hand; she caught the echo of the familiar "How are you?" though the sound seemed to be somewhat smothered in Melissa's fond embraces.

"My dear," gasped that long-suffering woman, "why didn't they come up?"

"Because I wouldn't let them. Lord Whimperdale is pressed for time, but he *would* drive young Mrs. Granger home himself. He's gone on her, I can tell you."

"Melissa!"

"Oh, it's all right and proper, bless you. He's old enough to be gone on anyone if he likes, and his lady wife couldn't bear Mrs. John out of her sight."

"Dear me—dear me!" said Mrs. Sweetapple, bringing her *pince-nez* to the fore to see if Melissa was only funning or in real sober earnest: "I hope you were not put in the shade, Melissa—you, a clergyman's daughter?"

"And such a dear duck of a clergyman too, that's the best of it. They said nice things about pa, I can tell you—so did I for the matter of that—and now just you listen and see if I wasn't right about Mrs. John. She's a brick, ma, that's what she is!"

"A brick, Melissa! I hope that you didn't use such an expression—"

"In the high and distinguished society in which I have been disporting myself? Well, if I didn't, I said what meant the same thing. You know it was this way. Lord Whimperdale said he must give me something good for our villagers this winter, and Mrs. John had it out in a second."

"Had what out?"

"Melissa would like a new harmonium for the church—one that wouldn't wheeze and gasp so—wouldn't you,

Melissa?" That's what she said, those lovely brown eyes of hers shining like jewels, and looking straight up into his lordship's face."

"She said that?"

Mrs. Sweetapple dropped her *pince-nez* as if the world had grown too brazen altogether to be looked at by any delicate-minded person.

"Yes. I think Mr. John was frightened—at all events he looked so—but Lady Whimperdale didn't mind a bit, bless you! She smiled and nodded her head, and then Lord W. said it was a graceful thought (if I'd said it they'd have said it was downright cheek), and he would see about it at once. He only wondered he'd never thought about it before—so do I, ma; he would have done if he wasn't such a dear, blind old bat; and—oh!" Here she caught sight of the Rector wabbling out from under the awning over the French window. "My dear old dad, it's coming, it's coming, it's coming, it's coming! We shan't wheeze and gurgle and squeak any more. I only hope Matthew Goldstraw won't have a fit, that's all."

By this time she had the Rector round the neck, and he, very happy, but a little dazed, patted her on the back, and then, releasing himself, put on his spectacles the better to look at her.

"I'm sure, my dear, it all sounds very nice," he said, "but what is it that is coming? I'm sure it can't be anything more welcome than that which has come already—youself, my child. Melissa, you're a sight good for sore eyes."

"It's a new organ, dad—a new harmonium for the church—one with all the latest improvements. Won't I wake it up, that's all. La, tra-la-la! tra-la-la! la, la, la!"

And round and round upon the soft green turf revolved the dainty *svelte* figure, while the Rector rubbed his hands, and beamed all over his lined old face like a rising sun.

Even Mrs. Sweetapple melted under the warmth of such radiance. She was quite as glad of the promised new

harmonium as anybody else, though the sight of Melissa's modest box standing outside the gate, patiently waiting for the wizened boy and the general girl to lug it up into the house, "gave her a turn," as she expressed it in her own mind, calling to remembrance the chance she had lost in not being in time to greet with proper effusion the inmates of the Hall drag. She would also have liked to administer a sharp reproof to Melissa for speaking of a member of the aristocracy as a "bat"; but even Mrs. Sweetapple had feelings, and these were touched and gratified by the prospect of the new harmonium.

She had not forgotten her mortification on the last occasion when the Bishop of the Diocese held a confirmation, and the inscrutable decrees of Fate allowed the present instrument to commence to shout like a lunatic on one high-pitched note, no one being able to stop it for ever so long, though no less than three people stamped wildly upon its pedals. She had not forgotten the Bishop's face, nor the crushing remark of Mrs. Bishop subsequently :

"That is the worst of these little country churches ; one can never be sure how the service will go."

"And she had once been a curate's wife herself," said Mrs. Sweetapple afterwards, "and perhaps had no organ at all ; and just three women and a boy behind a red curtain on a brass rod, like they have at that little church beyond Wiffle. Bishops aren't born ready made, Rector—don't tell me ! "

"Of course not—of course not, my dear," said the Rector, trying to smooth things over, but his Penelope knew he had been cruelly hurt by the behaviour of the harmonium, a behaviour so badly timed, too, that the instrument might almost have been a sentient thing inspired by malice of the basest kind.

Well, well, these things were memories of the past.

The next visit of his lordship to Low Cross would be a time of triumph. On the next visit of his lordship's better-half *that lady would no longer be able to sit in the seat*

of the scornful, and talk about little country churches as if she had been born in a cathedral.

"Pa," cried Melissa, "I hope the new what's-his-name will have a dither in it."

"A dither?" said the Rector, looking over his spectacles in a new amaze. "A dither?"

"That thing that gives you the jumps—don't you know?" said Melissa.

"The *tremolo* you mean, my dear; ah yes, used with great discretion an admirable thing. Then there's the *vox humana*. If this new instrument is something very superior it may have a *vox humana*."

He was a very happy old man that evening, was the Rector of Low Cross. He and Melissa got out a lot of sacred music. They hummed to each other like two bees.

Mrs. Sweetapple so far entered into the spirit of the hour as to beat time with her closed *pince-nez*.

But we are leaving Kate too long on her way to face the chill north-easter.

It met her at the door of the farm in the shape of Aunt Libbie.

Aunt Libbie had on her cameo brooch and her black mittens, and the gown that was apparently made out of sheet iron.

All these things were signs of the times, signs well comprehended by the family circle, and read like an open book.

The drag with its four horses came to a standstill at the farm-gate, and, as Lord Whimperdale doffed his hat to Miss Libbie, she made him a bow calculated to freeze the marrow in his bones. She would have died sooner than not taken her place at the door between the two gigantic box-wood mushrooms to greet any coming and speed every parting guest.

She had dogmas of her own had Miss Libbie, and, unlike many people who go in heavily for the same, she lived up to them, *coûte que coûte*.

There is every reason to suppose had she lived in the good old times when they roasted people alive for their opinions, she would have made an excellent martyr, and yielded her lean body up to be burned on Low Cross Green sooner than sacrifice her convictions.

It was "becoming" in her to salute Lord Whimperdale, as he was bringing back Mrs. John from the Hall. She would not fail in her duty, but she had not the least objection to him seeing that the duty was a disagreeable one.

The farmer himself came forward, but one would not exactly have used the word jolly to define him in his then condition.

Kate stretched out her hands to him to help her down, and he coloured up with pleasure at this token of her good will, for was not my Lord Whimperdale there all ready to perform the same office, to say nothing of John?

"I've had such a happy time," she said, smiling up into his face, as her light feet touched the ground.

"That's well," he was very near saying "my lass," but recollected himself in time, remembering the august company he was in.

Jack was the only person apparently sensible of no depression in spirits on this occasion. He rushed out in a frantic state of love and joy at seeing Kate back again, stood on end with his paws on the tire of the wheel, swinging his tail from side to side as she leaped down, and then did his best to topple her over with his mad caresses.

"My grand fellow," said Lord Whimperdale, laughing as he watched the dog's gambols, "you make no secret of the state of your affections! A good sign—a good sign."

"Ay," said Thomas Granger, "that's what I said furst night as our John here brought her whoam. A dog's got a keen nose to smell out a tender heart—that has he—be where it may."

As was usual with the worthy farmer, the northern burr came out strongest when he was a bit flustered; but perhaps

Kate had found some music in its ring, for she smiled as he spoke, and then in a minute, as it were, the four roans and the high drag, the lordly man who handled the ribbons so deftly, the footmen in their trim livery, all swept down the road, and Low Cross Farm was left to its wonted commonplace existence.

The twins furtively watching from the dormer-window were highly excited.

They caught hold of each other. They asked each other if it wasn't "fine now"? But their excitement had something smothered and contraband about it, and when they walked (not ran this time) downstairs to greet their Bonnie Kate, their pretty joy was clouded over, like the sun in an April sky.

Even Jack dropped his tail, and carried it half-mast high as he entered the house-place.

Thoroughly bewildered by the atmosphere in which she found herself, Kate took off her hat, settled her wind-ruffled locks, and gave a long, deep sigh, that John's ear, quickened by the subtle intuition of love, caught and understood.

"Come upstairs, dear," he said, laying his hand tenderly upon her shoulder, "and Ray will bring you up a cup of tea."

Men always blunder in these little domestic crises, and, as it happened, John could not have made a more indiscreet remark.

Miss Libbie grew starker and straighter than before, if that were possible, and folded her mittened hands, that trembled in spite of her.

"The meal will be ready in an hour's time, John. We're not much given to faddy fancies of tea at odd times in this house, though I reckon among the fine folk you and your wife have been keeping company with, nothing's thought of such ways. Mrs. John can have her tea in between whiles if she likes, but it's what's never bin the custom among us, for we're just plain kind of folk."

Up rushed the hot colour to Kate's face, and in a moment her hand was on John's mouth. She wanted to bar the egress of words that might make all future peace impossible.

"I do not want any tea," she said, laughing half hysterically, as women do at such times. "You are a dear stupid old goose, that's what you are, John; so be quiet, please, and let me go upstairs and get my unpacking done; then I shall be all ready when the meal's served," she added, with a sweet falling into the way of speech peculiar to the household, a gracious effort which wholly failed to mollify Miss Libbie.

The farmer himself passed poor Kate in the passage, and he missed the radiance that had warmed his old heart as she leaped to the ground from the Whimperdale drag, her little soft hands in his.

"Whatever's ado now?" he said, as he made for the house-place, and stared hard first at Aunt Libbie and then at John. "Who's been puttin' yon lass about, I'd loike to know? Bo' there's no need to ask; it's wrote on your face, Libbie, same as if it were wrote i' a book—i' big letters too. I wish yo'd take a mind to this wife o' John's, and not get your back oop just because the folks at the Hall knew her forbears, and are won by her sweet ways. Here's a pretty dander yo've been raisin' i' the house all day yesterday and all day to-day, and Susan shakin' i' her bed not knowin' what's amiss. You're not goin' to be trampled on?" This last observation in answer to some mutterings from Miss Libbie. "Well, who's goin' to trample on yo', Libbie? Who wants to trample on yo'?"

Miss Libbie, disdaining reply, sat down with a jerk in the window-seat, and set herself to knit as if dear life depended on her progress. She knitted so hard that the steel pins jarred against one another with such a clicking and clacking they might have been wanting to stab somebody—as perhaps they were.

"I've no mind to these junketin's," she said at last,

her long chin trembling, her lips twitching. "It's what's never bin the custom of this house."

"You never had anyone like my wife in this house before!" burst out John, strong enough in purpose and speech when there was no question of Kate's feelings concerned.

"Oh, don't mind," rejoined Aunt Libbie—"don't mind jeering and fleering at them as has brought you up, and kep' a roof over your head."

"Nobody *is* a mindin', Libbie; nobody's carin' a danged straw. All we want is to mak' yo' see reason, my lass."

Miss Libbie knitted harder than ever.

"I've no mind to fine ladies as is full o' fads, and fancies, and notions, and too fine for their company," she said, beginning, however, to speak hurriedly and a little chokingly, for the two men looked determined, and, after all, it was two to one—and that one a lone, lorn, solitary female.

"What if mistress John has a notion or two that you don't cotton to, nor perhaps never heard of, Libbie? What's the odds? She can do what she's a mind, and have what she's a mind, in Thomas Granger's house, conna she? If she can't, he'll know the reason why, anyhow."

And down came the farmer's clenched fist on the black oak table.

Miss Libbie was minded to hold her peace as to the cup of tea—after all, the *casus belli* in the case. She even went so far as to give a furtive glance at John, to assure herself that he would be equally discreet. She really thought "brother" was capable of anything in his present state of mind. He was (she felt positively convinced) capable of stripping off his coat, going in his shirt-sleeves into the kitchen, and frightening the maids out of their wits by seizing the kettle from the reckon, calling for about a pound of tea, and wetting it by cramming it bodily into the boiling water. You never knew what brother would do when he got his tantrums on him—never! It was beyond

the calculations of the wisest man on earth. Solomon himself couldn't have guessed at it—not he !

Miss Libbie thought it best to temporise with the enemy. Of course it goes without saying that she would have gone through fire and water or any other species of trial for the brother she in her heart adored, but for the present moment he appeared to her in the guise of an enemy to be struggled with.

"Of course she can have anything she wants, but still it's hard enoo' to feel that there's one in the midst of us who despises and looks down upon us—one who feels more content among folk as is high above our heads, as you may say—and who has fads and fancies."

Miss Libbie felt she was getting perilously near the cup of tea, and pulled herself up with a round turn.

"Looks down upon yo'—despises yo'!" shouted the farmer. "When did she do owt o' t' sort? Hasna she been sweet as honey and the honeycomb, as the Book has it, ever sin' she come among us? Hasna she been that gentle to yo' as I've wondered many a time to see her? She's never bin used to t' likes of us, and it shows how dear she held our John here in her gentle heart, that when he told her the mak' o' folk we wur——"

"Hush, father, you have said enough," put in John, strangely agitated, as the farmer thought : indeed, he stared at his son's white face and knitted brows in blank amaze, fearing in his honest heart that things had been worse with Miss Libbie and Kate than he had had any idea of.

"Well, well, lad," he said, laying a heavy hand on John's shoulder, "it's just this way: Libbie there can no more tak' in thy wife and her thoughts and her ways than thy Uncle Toser could read all he saw through that mighty long spy-glass of his in the heavens above. There's things about that Bonnie Kate of thine that I reckon none of us can rightly understand. We can see the shinin' of her pretty eyes, and hear her sweet voice speakin', bo' we can't

do much more, my lad. Yo're different. Yo've growed a gentleman, same as the rest o' them soart ; and sweet as she be, Bonnie Kate's not too bonnie a bit to be set like a posy in thy boosom. But Libbie, here, she's like a dough-nut ower baked—she keeps a hard heart in her breast towards thy wife, and harbours a jealous mind. Ah, Libbie, my lass ! there's brown delf and there's chinay, like mother's chinay bowl as yo' can fair see through—and they're both crockery-ware, after a fashion, but they're a sight different one from the other. Yo're a good lass, Libbie, i' your own way, an' yo've bin a handy friend to me sin' t' missus took sick, and I'm not the man to forget thy benefits ; but brown delf is to hold buttermilk and gruel and such like, and mother's chinay bowl is best filled wi' roses, and there's no manner of good for the one to call the other, for both be good after their kind. I'm a plain soart o' a man, but I've two eyes i' my head, and I can see the difference o' things, and see into the nature o' things, and that's what few female-critters can do, Libbie—yo' less than most."

Poor Miss Libbie ! she had patched and mended ; she had stood on cold flags to see that the butter was rightly done in the dairy ; she had herself hunted for the eggs of hens that were weak-minded enough to "lay astray" in the hedges and ditches instead of in their own lawful nests ; she had done all these things and many more besides, year after year, and year after year ; and now she was called a piece of brown delf, while this useless fine lady (how unjust are our thoughts when we are in a passion !), with her fine company, and her airs and graces, looking quite out of place in an honest farmhouse, where people wore their skirts up to their ankles, and not trailing after them with a rustle like the wind in the long grass before hay-carrying—now this slip of a girl was set over her head and given credit, as it were, for being dainty, and sweet, and well-favoured, all *of which things* she could not help a bit.

Would you say that the flowers in the garden deserved

credit for budding and blowing? Because one was white and one was red, because one was sweet to smell, and another climbed and drooped and hung its blossoms on the wall like bells, was there any credit due to them for being fair? Such thoughts as these in crude, disjointed form kept running through Miss Libbie's head as she sat in the sunshine vehemently knitting.

"Let a be—let a be, Libbie," said the farmer, waxing almost pleading as he noted his sister's face, hard and expressionless as the figurehead of a ship. "They's be soon gone, these two, and it worrits John to see thee so set agen' his wife. It's only nat'rel as the folks at the Hall should mak' a fuss wi' the likes o' her. Let's have peace, my lass, for the bit o' brightness that's left."

This, however, was by no means the way to soften the figurehead and woo it into life, if the farmer had only known it.

To speak of the rest of Kate's stay at Low Cross as "a bit o' brightness" was to aggravate Miss Libbie to extremity. It meant that he himself, Thomas Granger, farmer, had had his foolish old head turned by a pretty face and a winning manner, as well as the rest. It meant that the presence of this delicate bit of china, so much more precious than the honest useful bowl of good brown delf, made things so pleasant for brother that he likened it to something bright and shining—to the stars that Uncle Toser was always gazing up to, and stumbling into ruts and ditches, and against trees and palings, in consequence.

They were all alike, these men! There was a spice of King Solomon in all of them. Solid worth had no chance against fallals, and danglements, and a mincing gait.

So Miss Libbie refused to be softened, and the farmer, striding from the room, left the figurehead staring stonily out upon the meadow and the larch wood, the knitting going on mechanically all the while, and John, almost himself *as stony, standing by the chimney, with his elbow on the narrow ledge of oak, and his hand shading his eyes.*

Once outside the room, and the sneck of the door sharply closed, Mr. Granger put a hesitating foot on the lowest step of the winding stair. He had a mind to go and seek out Kate, and speak a word or two of sweetness and comfort in her ear.

But he still stood in a certain awe of her. She was still to him, in a way, the dainty, half-transparent bowl that Susan set such store by, and that he was afraid to lift in his brawny hand. It might seem that he was making too free if he sought her out in the guest-chamber, where the roses framed the windows and the swallows twittered so close above.

He put the longing aside, also the still deeper one to go and tell his loving, helpless Susie all about it. Years ago they had told him trouble must be kept away from Susie.

Disconsolate enough—for he was a man who loved peace and hated discord—the farmer went his way, and as he went he crooned the refrain of a song to himself—a song that his family knew as the sign of much trouble :

“Here we sit, like birds in the wilderness—
Here we sit, like birds in the wilderness.”

What a picture of arid desolation did this lamentable chorus present to the mind’s eye! Birds, gaunt and draggled, sitting all arow!

“Ray,” said Leah, peeping out at one side of the lily on the ledge, “father’s a lot put out, and no mistake. Hark till him !”

The house master was walking slowly down towards the shippions, and they caught the last words of the refrain, “like birds in the wilderness.”

“Oh, Ray,” cried Leah, in a hushed sort of frenzy, “isn’t Aunt Libbie too horrid? To make us all feel like this just because Kate went to stay at the Hall !”

“Yes,” said Leah, mingling wisdom with her sorrow, “but

hadna we best go in and see mother? Happen she'll be thinking as something's wrong, and that'll make her bad."

So the two went together, but when they got there, behold Kate, smiling and full of chat, sitting with her back to the light, and telling the sweet house-mother about all the grand doings at the Hall, describing especially, and with careful detail, the varieties of cakes displayed on various festive occasions.

But Ray caught sight of pink rims round the golden-brown eyes, and knew that Bonnie Kate had been weeping. Happily the mother's sight was somewhat dim with long weakness and suffering, and there was nothing in Kate's sweet, low voice that told of any storm within.

Mrs. Granger was quite roused and excited about the cakes.

"Did yo' ever hear the like?" she said, a pretty, pale flush just tinging each thin cheek. "Cakes tall and slim as the pine-tops, and some wi' whipped cream, and bits o' sugar-drops, pink an' blue, scattered over them like so much rain! Ah, my dear," turning to Kate, with a look of beautiful, yearning love, "I wish I wur well for a day, and could mak' ye a cake o' my own settin'; I reckon yo'd think it prime, for I was always counted a gran' hand at cakes."

"I'm sure I should think it sweeter than any other cake in the world," said Kate, softly touching the hand that would have worked so willingly, and now lay so helpless.

Meanwhile, in the house-place below, John and Miss Libbie kept weary tryst. Jack, a black and tawny heap, squatted on the mat between the windows, looking wistfully from one to the other, as who should say:

"This is sad work, my masters; what's ado?"

The delicate, irresolute mouth under John's beard was tremulous. He was cut to the heart by the unkindly spirit shown towards his Bonnie Kate. Hard words and petty tyrannies he had suffered betimes at the hands of Aunt Libbie from his youth upwards. He, knowing her worth

at bottom, had dealt patiently with her, but now it was harder work, since Kate was the sufferer.

"Aunt Libbie," he said at last, drawing a long breath, "do you grudge me my happiness that you try so hard to spoil it? It was more what you said than anything else that made me bring my wife to Low Cross. I wish I had never done so."

Miss Libbie tossed her head high in the air.

"I knew this was comin'. It's nothing but what I might have looked for; it's what I've bin waitin' for."

"Waiting for?" asked John, lifting his head high too, his clear shining eyes ablaze with the heat of battle; "waiting for, Aunt Libbie?"

She was defiant, resolute, hardened to the likeness of a stone.

"Ay, waiting for. This Kate of yours looks down on them as is her husband's flesh and blood, and she's teaching him to sing t' same tune."

"What fault have you to find with her?" he said, coming a step or two nearer to her where she sat. "Has she not been the dearest, sweetest, best——"

His words choked him.

"Hasna she made t' best on us, that's what yo'd fain say—eh, lad? Well, give her that due, if yo' will, but in her heart she scorns us, and the day 'ull come when she'll scorn thee too."

He made a vehement gesture.

"No matter, no matter," she said, rocking herself slowly to and fro, and letting her pins fall, hands and all, upon her knee; "I can wait. It's early days yet for yo' to be sorrowful-like that yo' married a fine lady, and one that looks down on them as owns yo'—early days yet awhile, but it 'ull come, it 'ull come, it 'ull come."

She muttered these words to herself, giving a shrewd look at John, and, taking her knitting once again, set to work *at that* unending twist and tanglement of threads with

a deliberation that seemed to indicate her perfect faith in her own prophecy ; her absolute willingness to sit there knitting in the sun and in the shade until that prophecy should be fulfilled. The set lips, the stern brow, seemed to say : " I can wait, the end will come ; a little sooner or a little later, what matter ? "

As for John, the passion died out in him as suddenly as it had blazed up.

Of what avail to try and defend his darling against such senseless clamour ? Surely such cavilling was best treated with the silent contempt it deserved. He even smiled to himself as he turned away, recalling her loving tenderness towards him, her gentle ways, her clinging arms, her lips that touched his lingeringly as though loth to forego the sweetness of his kiss.

But he forgot an old and homely proverb as to the speech that is said to lie in silence.

He little thought that Aunt Libbie, knitting in the sunshine of the house-place window, was spinning a thread of his life in the days to come, even as in the old mythology the weird Clotho was fabled to spin the strands of the lives of men.

CHAPTER XIII.

FAREWELL TO LOW CROSS

WOULD Kate have believed it if anyone had told her so three weeks back? Would she have believed that the thought of leaving Low Cross Farm could give her such a stab of pain?

Yet so it was.

Their stay had been already prolonged beyond its originally intended limits, but now the vacation was nearly over, large bundles of papers kept coming to hand for John—one that made his eyes fill with the light of gladness and ambition, for it was a brief with a satisfactory fee scribbled in pencil on the margin. He was to be junior counsel in an important case. How doubly sweet success when it could be laid at Kate's feet as a love-offering!

The farmer was deeply impressed, not by the quality or nature, but by the size and number of the documents received by his son.

"Well, now!" he would say, and slap his thigh to give emphasis to his words.

"Garry Owen" was once more heard ringing through the house. Thomas Granger was no longer seated in desolation like a "bird in the wilderness."

He went to The Arms now and again of an evening, and told of the marvellous "papers and such like" that came to "our John." His audience listened in respectful awe.

"It wur a fine thing sure-ly to have a son as had growed to

be a gentleman, and married a real lady," said they afterwards among themselves.

But Thomas Granger was very sorry to think of Kate going away. He could not have put into words what her delicate and refined tact towards him had been ; but he had felt it as we feel the warmth of the sunshine. Had she not taken an interest in his beasts and his crops, in the corn, and the eggs, and the butter, in everything about the place "like as though she'd bin born to 't"? Best of all, had she not shown such sweetness and gentleness to Susie—his poor, helpless Susie—as had gone far to brighten that still, quiet life for the time being, and brought many a smile to the pale, patient lips ? Then there was Humbie ; why the boy followed Kate about like her shadow—he and Jack too, for matter of that—and played his bonniest tunes to please her ear, and gathered the prettiest posies to set in her gentle breast. Then the lassies—

"Hoot ! but they'd be sore at heart when her foot should be heard no more on the stair, nor her voice in the garden callin'. They wur simple enoo lassies, but they wur good and true—not like some who'd think it no shame to stand tattling wi' the boys at the gateways, and such-like unbecomingness, not they."

Thus ran the farmer's thoughts.

Then they glanced upon a less savoury theme.

There had been but one blot on the fair content of Mrs. John's stay in the old homestead, and that had been—Aunt Libbie.

"For matter o' that—dang Libbie !" quoth the farmer to himself as he kicked a stone out of his pathway.

Which, again, was perhaps rather hard on Miss Libbie.

She had been very jealous and very "nasty," as the saying went in those parts ; but if you had dug deep down into her heart you would have found the jealousy was as much for her "lassies" as for herself. She did not like to see the world of Low Cross turned upside down for a slip of a

girl with new-fangled ways, and a fashion of moving about so that you could see her more than you could hear her. Then there was Susie.

Miss Libbie had been hard on Susie—some people might perhaps have been ready to use even a stronger word than that—in the first day of her sore affliction; but the patience and gentleness of the sick woman had done its work, and Miss Libbie had grown to love her brother's wife in her own way—not a very demonstrative, nor yet perhaps a very pleasant way, but still a real way. There had been noble service, active care, and these things spread over years; and yet, when had Miss Libbie ever seen Susie flush up and tremble with pleasure when she (Miss Libbie) went into the room that was kept so neat and clean and spruce by her (Miss Libbie's) constant supervision of the whole household—when?

There are men and women in the world who spend all their time fretting at the curb and pulling at the collar.

Of these Miss Libbie was one. Such number among them many excellent persons, but they are not pleasant to live with, nor do they ever get the share of love and gratitude that is their due. You would as soon think of being effusive or tender to them as of stroking a hedgehog. And yet the hedgehog may be a most irreproachable member of the society in which he moves, zealous in providing for his family, and possessed of every sterling quality a hedgehog should have.

Perhaps it may be said that at the last—at the very last—Miss Libbie softened somewhat towards her nephew John's wife. It was not a complete thaw by any means, only just such a glistening of the surface as you may see upon an ice-bound pool where the wintry sun strikes at noon. Most of us are sensible of a certain feeble glow towards those we do not like, and have nothing in common with, when they are going. It may appear to us as the only really agreeable thing we have known them do. It takes the guise of a *virtue* in our eyes, and we are grateful accordingly.

There can be no manner of doubt that Miss Libbie was happy in contemplating the near prospect of a return to the still waters of the days before the farm was invaded by this lady-fair who had won all hearts and turned all heads. She was rejoiced to think that no more roans would paw up the roadway by the gate, and no more fine ladies and gentlemen stride and mince along the cobbled pathway to the door.

If she remembered that there would be a blank in the sick chamber, that Humbie's violin would play only music set in the minor key, and that the lassies would cry their pretty eyes out in the chamber with the dormer window, she put all such fancies from her with a stern hand. Any little lurking tenderness for Kate that might have nestled in some deep-down corner of her heart she also cast out mercilessly. She was like a mad dog who can only run in a straight line. Only one line of reasoning was possible to her.

Any person who visited at Steadly Hall on an equality with the owners thereof and with all their fine friends must of necessity look down upon Low Cross Farm and those who lived in it. *Ergo*, Mrs. John looked down upon her husband's people, and upon their men-servants and their women-servants, and the cattle within their gates. She—Miss Libbie—sister of Thomas Granger, was not going to be trampled upon. There you had it; the thing lay in a nutshell.

That nobody wanted to trample upon her had nothing to say to the matter.

Meanwhile, Kate, with eyes somewhat sad and wistful, looked on all the things around her that had taught her new thoughts and given her new knowledge of life, and grown precious to her exceedingly.

She wondered herself at the reluctance with which she looked upon the thought of leaving them.

The early mornings were now dim with a faint veil of mist

that lifted before noon, and showed a ripe, rich, sun-bright world. "The Whimperdale Arms" made a sort of glory on the green, with its tall rows of hollyhocks, crimson, white and yellow. Ruddy berries were on the trees and in the hedges; apples gleamed red among the leaves in the fruit orchards; the plums were ripe along the walls. Everything seemed so full and beautiful—so teeming with perfection. Mrs. Sweetapple's dahlias were indeed a show, and in the russet-brown bosoms of the stately sunflowers the gold-barred bees nestled and crept.

Kate thought she had never realised the picturesque beauty of the village—the murmuring charm of the beck. The quaint devices of the yew-trees standing sentinel on either side the farmhouse doorway struck her anew. She climbed the hill to the churchyard again and yet again, conscious of a motion of tenderness even towards the hobbled, sad-faced donkey and the blundering sheep.

Nor were amusing incidents wanting.

Mrs. Sweetapple—quite a different Mrs. Sweetapple to the one who made that obliging offer about the dahlias; indeed, no relation, so to speak, to that lady—came to say adieu to the bride who was about to spread her wings and fly south. This Mrs. Sweetapple had an air of *nous autres*; she, and Mrs. John, and *that set*—meaning the Hall people—were the salt of the earth. If there had ever been any chance that Mrs. Beesley should be forgiven for those unlucky windfalls, that chance existed no longer.

Viewed from the present standpoint, Mrs. Sweetapple looked upon Mrs. Beesley's misdoings as more heinous than before. The good Rector's wife rambled on about what she had felt when a letter, with the Steadly griffin grinning his best on the seal, arrived at the Rectory for Melissa, and about the presentiment she had had before that griffin was defaced and broken that he heralded an invitation to the Hall. She pranced about and caracolled upon her social *steed as much as she liked*, for Melissa had neither thought

nor energy to enter upon a war of words. Mrs. John was going ; the next time they came into that lovely old house-place it would seem empty for lack of her. These things being so, the babble that might be going on around counted for nothing. The girl sat by Kate, holding her hand and stroking it gently.

Mrs. Sweetapple brayed on.

"I said to Lady Whimperdale when I met her in the village yesterday—I had waved my parasol to the man to stop the pony-carriage, you understand—whatever will become of Melissa when young Mrs. Granger goes, I'm sure I don't know."

At another time Melissa would have had some veiled arrow ready to launch at the stopping of the Whimperdale chariot ; but now, with her eyes all soft and dewy, she could only, for once, echo her mother's words :

"Whatever will become of Melissa when you are gone?" then she added, with a sweet winningness : "But you will come again?"

"Oh yes," said Kate, smiling down upon the eager face ; "I shall come again. I have learned to love Low Cross so much, it will not be long before I come again."

They all went together down to the gateway, their number increased by Humbie and Jack, and the last words of Kate's of which this strange, silent Melissa carried away the memory were these :

"I shall come again—it is not good-bye for always."

We say these things—do we not ? all of us—counting as certainly upon the future as on the past and present ; and all the time an angel may be weeping near us, though we see him not, weeping and sighing out the one word, "Nevermore!"

For though we come again, it may be we shall tread the old familiar paths "with a difference" ; it may be we shall not see the blue of the distant hills, and the gleam of the rippling *streamlet*, save through the blinding mist of our *tears*.

This was Kate's last day at Low Cross. The twins followed her about from place to place, and helped to pack up all her pretty things in grave silence, different, indeed, from their cackle when they were folding the dress of pink silk and black lace to go to Steadly. They had come to the conclusion that they should find their best consolation in that "talking things over" so beloved by the female mind. They should be a great deal in mother's room; instinct told them the one pervading topic of their conversation would be welcome there. It also warned them that in Aunt Libbie's presence this topic would have to be smothered altogether, or touched upon in whispers.

The great excitement in Low Cross just now was the idea of a Sunday that should come ere long, when the most wonderful instrument of modern times would be heard in the church on the hill. No one, by the way, mourned the prospective disappearance of the ancient and wheezy harmonium at present in possession, save Matthew Goldstraw. To him it would be the loss of an old friend.

"I've respectfully blow'd that there orgin for nigh sixteen years," he said, ruminating sadly, "and it's but nat'r'l I should mourn over it. I'm not one to take to new-fangled ways, and it hurts me to hear it be-called. I'm not the man I was. Whiles and agen I feel like as if a hive o' bees wur in my.yed, buzzing round, and it makes me feel pretty middling, I can tell yo'. T' ould orgin's a-going, and I'll be a-follerin' of it to its long home sooner than folks think for, may be."

Matthew's family were not as much affected by this picture of his near decease as might have been expected. The fact was, whenever the old man was put out he always gave expression to these melancholy forebodings, and had been in the habit of doing so any time these ten years back—hence this stony indifference.

This is, however, all a digression, and has resulted from my wish to explain how all the go, and delight, and excite-

ment of the new organ was blemished and blurred for Leah and Ray because their Bonnie Kate would not be there to hear its boom, and thrill, and "dither," as Miss Sweetapple expressed it. They should, of course, write long descriptions of all that took place ; but it would not be the same thing. Besides, letter-writing was not an easy or pleasurable process to the two Miss Grangers. It rather assumed the aspect of a fearful joy ; conferring a sense of dignity, certainly, but still not without its embarrassments.

As Kate had come in sunshine, so it seemed in sunshine she was to go. She had wandered here and there, looking at all things with a new and keener interest ; all the world of daily life at the farm grew dearer because she was about to leave it.

The lowing of the kine as they lurched up from the meadows ; the soft rush of the milk in the pails ; the little pink pigs rushing through the straw when Ebenezer, the "shed-man," tapped loudly on the tin lid of the can that held the mess of the meal their souls loved ; the *coo roo, coo roo* of the pigeons on the comb of the roof, their bowings and flutterings ; the antics of the black kitten, who followed stately Jack about from pillar to post to get taken notice of by that potentate in any way, however disagreeable : all these things and a score besides Kate watched with the eagerness a near severance brings.

Even the grey and yellow lichens and the bosses of velvety green moss upon the cottage roofs seemed to have a new charm for her. She let her eyes slowly travel over them, over the Cross, the Green, over everything, lingeringly, as we touch what we love and must part with. She could give no reason at the time, even to herself, for this sadness, inadequate as it seemed ; but in later years she looked back upon it as what superstitious people call a "warning"—a shadow of things to come.

It was such a different life she was going to in her London *home* ; *old friends* about her, old associations and habits

taken up again as if never dropped. The farmhouse and the farm life would grow to seem strange and far off, but she would love to recall the sights and sounds that had clustered round it and made it beautiful.

With the close of this day there came to Kate one of the most sweet and solemn hours of her young life. There are times in the lives of most of us upon which we look back in the same spirit as that in which we recall the hearing of some grand and penetrating music—music fitter, or so it seems, for heaven than earth—music whose strains haunt us, pathetic, pleading, pitiful, through all the passing of the years.

It was after what Miss Libbie saw fit to call the “late meal” that Kate, having fully finished her preparations for the morrow, went up to the mother’s room.

The creeping dusk was falling over the world like a veil, here and there pierced by the faint shimmer of a star. No flaring gas lit up Low Cross Farm. The long passages were grey and dim, with here and there a patch of pearly light from a deep-set casement. Looking through these as you passed you could see the faint mist and the pale gleam of the stars. Kate lingered a moment.

How dark and ghostlike looked the firs limned against the grey!

Their edges were blurred; their branches looked like funeral plumes. What an eldrich seemed the long-drawn-out lowing of a cow in the distant sheds!

As Kate opened the door of the sick-room, Humbie rose from a chair at the head of the bed; Jack floundered up from his place on the window-step.

Kate thought her young brother (he had grown dear as such to her by now) looked pale and wan as he passed her. But perhaps it was only the dim light that made her fancy so—fancy even that a trace of tears was in the wistful eyes.

Humbie never spoke. He just passed out of the room,

followed by Jack (who, however, gave a questioning look back at Kate, as though wondering if anything were wrong), and closed the door—not, however, before his mother had raised her head from the pillow and spoken to him in a low tone that held a thrill in it.

"You'll tell the girlies as Kate 'ull read the evening chapter for me, Humbie?"

He understood that the two women were to be left alone. Outside he pressed his hand to his eyes for a moment, then set off to fulfil his mission, and add his own explanation thereto.

"Mother wants Mrs. John all to hersel' to-night," said Ray.

"And no wonder," replied Leah, "with to-morrow so handy."

John, who was poring over some papers at the centre table, looked up at this, shortly laying down his pencil and going out into the meadow, where they could see him pacing slowly up and down.

Humbie joined him before long, flinging his arm over his brother's shoulder, and there was a low murmur of voices. Jack marched at their heels, with tail depressed and drooped head. He took it to heart, after the manner of dogs of his kind, that neither had a word or look for him. He resented confidences in which he had no part.

Meanwhile, in the room above, Kate was kneeling by the mother's bed, holding her hand, and gazing up into her face.

"I want yo' close to me, my dearie," she had said, "for there's a deal I want to say, and I'm a bit tired like, as I often am whiles and agen."

So Kate went close. The light from the lamp upon the little table showed her face somewhat pale and grave, yet full of a tender joy.

It was so sweet to feel that John's mother loved her *like that!*

Mrs. Granger put up her hand, and drew the sweet face still closer, looking steadfastly into the soft brown eyes.

"My dear," she said, "now that parting's near, don't be angry if I tell yo' all my mind. I couldna' be happy to let yo' go, and keep owt back. Sick folk see long and far. There's times when their own thoughts seem to be speakin' to 'em like as if they wur voices. It's hard for me to say what I mean, and yet I mean to do it, or I'll never rest when yo're gone from me."

Kate bent her head, and gently kissed the faded cheek, stroked the thin fingers that lay so feeble and helpless in her own ; but she did not speak. It was best to let the full heart unburden itself in its own way.

"Lass, when first yo' come whoam to Low Cross my heart wur big wi' fears. I could see what no one had ever told me—I could read what never wur wrote in words ; but if I hurt yo' wi' what I say, call to mind I'm nought but a fullish owd woman, full o' fancies as an egg's full o' meat, and tak' no heed on't—take no heed on't!"

Mrs. Granger began to shake and tremble, she clutched at Kate's hand, and peered more and more closely into her face. Her voice was broken and fearsome.

"It wur because he loved yo' so dear—so dear—he wur like one as darena' risk all he had, because if he lost it he'd be bereft indeed all t' days of his life to come. It wur because he loved yo' so dear—so dear. I knew how things wur atween yo' that fust night yo' came ; I saw it in your bonnie face, and in the set o' your queenly head—I know'd i' my heart, an' I grieved i' my heart, an' I know'd he'd bin fullish had John, and Humbie know'd, but we darena' speak o't. Oh, my lass—my lass ! Never carry bitterness i' your loving heart to my John because he hadn'a' t' spunk to speak out plain, and tell yo' what plain soart o' folk wur his'n. He loved yo' so dear—so dear—he wur *feared over much*. When yo' feel hardly towards him over *the memory of it*, say to yoursel' over and over agen, 'It wur

because he loved me so dear.' When things go a bit criss-cross, as they will nows and agens with t' best of married folk, and t' old grudge rises up, say to yoursel': 'It wur because he loved me so dear.'"

Kate's head was dropped down upon the pretty patchwork quilt. Her face was hidden in her hands. Low, subdued sobs shook her from head to foot. Working herself up into a condition of great excitement and agitation, Mrs. Granger rose in her bed, laid her hand on the bowed brown tresses, while the tears fell thick and fast as she went on speaking :

"I have prayed i' t' night-watches, I have watered my bed wi' my tears ; I have asked my God to give me words of wisdom to say to thee—to comfort thee—and stay thee, for I know t' wound is there in thy tender heart. A mother's eyes are quick to see, love sharpens 'em, and John wur i' the wrong—but, oh, my girl—it wur because he loved thee so dear."

She lay back on the pillows, closing her eyes ; and Kate, lifting her white face from the coverlet, bent over her, kissing her and fondling her.

There are times when women will kiss each other and cling to each other like that, seeming to find thus a closer understanding, a more adequate expression, than in any words.

"Dunnot try to speak on 't," said Mrs. Granger, as they both grew calmer ; "no woman as is worth owt cares to speak agen her mon ; be it ever so little ; bu' bear wi' me, and hark to me while I tell thee summat of t' memories that lie i' my heart. I'd like to tell thee what a son John's bin to me i' t' days that are past. Yo' see it wur some time after Humbie wur born afore we knew what wur amiss. It had seemed sorrow enoo for me to be laid by, and a burden, as yo' may say, upon all ; bo' when all t' truth of things wur laid before us plain, and we know'd Humbie would never be same as other folk, our burden seemed too heavy to be borne, and t' father and I seemed to grow secret-like wi' one another and afear'd to speak open

words. Folks about here said as it wur a kind of a blight on me—I'd a deal to put up with—for one an' another 'ud come peekin' at him in his cradle, and shake their heads, same as if it wur some fault o' mine, as the lad were so. Havin' such a fine straight boy as John, wi' 's bonnie eyes and curly yed, made it seem harder on me to have another boy a crookback, and so weak and wangling, as they say. I'd used to think of him as t' dear Saviour healed, and how fain and glad his mother must ha' been, and he, like enoo, comin' to her leapin' and runnin', as had bin carried away from her on his bed. I've thought on these things till I've bin blind as a beetle, as t' saying goes, wi' tears an' weepin', for I've thought as things seemed hard and unfair betwixt her and me, and then summat within me would say, 'Yo' must wait 'till yo' see yer lad i' heaven to see him straight and bonnie same as her'n, Susan, my girl.' Not bo' what Humbie's bin a dear good lad to me, lovin' as a girl, and so deft wi' those long fingers o' his ; still I couldn'a help but be proudest o' John. Eh, bo' I've felt my heart swell nigh to burstin' when I've heard Mr. Sweetapple telling what a knowledgeable boy he was, and t' father tryin' for to look as if he didna' care about t' matter, not he, a-flickin' his fingers as much as to say, 'I'm not one as thinks much o' a mort o' book learnin', bo' say yer say, gentleman, say yer say, an' all t' blessed while he wur ready to strut round like t' bubblyjock i' t' strawyard for pride wur t' father, as well I know'd by t' glint o' his 'ee, and t' general fashion o' him.'"

"He could not help being proud, I should think," said Kate, smiling through the tears that still shone about her long, up-curled lashes—"he could not help but be proud."

"There never was such a lad for books as our John," continued Mrs. Granger, stimulated by the keen interest shown by her listener, and happy that Kate had accepted her *dictum as to* letting that other subject of their conversation *drop into silence*; "he'd huddle under t' haystacks wi' 's

book upon his knees, and the farmer he'd get a bit troubled-like in his mind, and 'Susie,' he'd say, 'book-learning 's all very well, but where's t' lad to 'get a livin' from?' Bo' yo' see t' good God had it all planned out, for when Uncle Toser died he lef' a' t' money to give t' lad a first-rate eddication, an' soon folk said, when John came home from school, as he'd grow'd quite t' gentleman, an', truth to tell, I thought it mysel'. Ay, an' I wur fain over it too. It wur a fine thing for Susan Granger to have a son as had grow'd a gentleman, and used to take tea at t' Rectory, Sundays, and be spoke to on Wiffle station by real quality. But John wur no different at heart, not he, though his clothes wur t' best, an' made at t' market town, an' he'd got to speak same way as them as has much learnin', an' would take off his hat to t' folk from t' Hall wi' as grand a grace as Lord Whimperdale himself. John wur no different, bless yo'! He'd used to carry little Humbie up t' village in his arms many an' many a time, when he saw I wur hurt by t' neighbours' looks; he seemed to want to say to me, 'I be'ant ashamed o' our little hunchback, be who else may, mother,' an' t' child clung about him, and loved t' very shadow o' him, same as he does now—same as he does now."

The sick woman was silent awhile, lying back white and wan after such a long and unwonted speech; then she said, with a long, deep sigh of thankfulness:

"Ay, but it's sweet—ay, but it's sweet to think what a lovin' son John has been to me. Now you can go," she added, suddenly turning to Kate; "I'm strong to bear it now; happen I'll grow weak in a bit and couldna' stand it. This is good-bye, my dearie, for I'll be asleep t' morn. Bend down till I kiss you and bless yo'. Nay, lass, dunna greet like that; yo'll spoil yo're pretty eyes."

So she kissed and blessed "John's wife," and then, with a little 'sob, turned her face to the wall.

Kate felt herself dismissed.

She stood still as a statue for a moment, looking round

the room as though to impress every detail of it upon her memory.

Last of all her eyes rested on the shrouded figure in the bed.

There was a slight farewell gesture of the hand that lay upon the coverlet, and then all was still.

The door opened and closed.

Kate was out in the long, dim passage, with its patches of grey light, and the leaf shadows round them showing dark and clear.

She had said farewell to the mother of the man she loved—to the one being in all the world who could most fully enter into the tenderness and passion of her devotion to him—who, made wise herself by love, could best understand how his lack of perfect trust in her had stabbed her heart through and through, could best seek for, and find, sweet words of comfort to heal and soften the wound.

Anything that touched Thomas Granger's feelings always made him what he called "a bit gruffish."

He was very gruff indeed on the morning that John and his wife drove away from Low Cross Farm; so gruff, that Ebenezer and the rest of the farm hands thought it best to give him a wide berth.

No one knew how the rough, rugged nature had been touched and softened by the girlish presence in the old home. No one knew how already, though she had been scarce an hour gone, he missed her light foot on the stairs, her sweet voice about the house.

As to the twins, they had fled to the shelter of the room with the dormer window, the while Aunt Libbie worked off the excitement of her feelings by instituting a searching house-cleaning here, there, and everywhere. Truly may it be said that before that day was over, Thomas Granger had good cause to describe himself as a bird in the wilderness.

Matthew drove the gig and its precious freight to the

station, with an expression of face that would not have ill-befitted a funeral ; nor did he make one single comment on the keen mare. Wiffle, that centre of excitement, was more than usually crowded—a dog, two men, and a woman, with a basket, waiting there for the train ; but Matthew contrived to get a quiet word with Mrs. John.

"Blessin's go with yo', Mistress John, for t' sweet comfort yo' gave me i' my trouble. I'm glad to think as Betsy Jane 'ull be changed ; it's a gran' thought."

As the train went crawling out Humbie held Jack by the collar, and Jack, with his tongue hanging out to its fullest extent, made a dreadful choking noise in his throat in his efforts to rush after it.

Kate waved her hand from the window. Wiffle, with its station-master and his dahlias, with Humbie's dear, sad face, and Jack's frantic, strangled bark, passed out of sight and hearing.

John and his wife were on the road to their home down south.

"We are like swallows, flying south," she said presently, slipping her hand into his, and looking up into his face with an April smile.

But John looked very grave, and the smile died away from Kate's lips as she met his eyes. They were very tender, those dear, fond eyes of his ; but how strange that deep down in their light she saw something that looked like pity !

He turned from her, holding her hand in a strained, close grasp. What was John thinking of, she pondered ? Could it be that he fancied, that he feared, she was pitying herself for any of her experiences at Low Cross ? What lay between them made her shy of speaking out ; and at the junction they found a crowded train, and so were no more alone together all that day.

As they reached their home, a glint of sunshine caught the gold and crimson of the Virginia creeper festooned about the balcony. Some late roses were blossoming above the doorway.

West Kensington, seen thus to advantage, did not seem a harsh change from the hills and dales, and the far-spreading wolds of distant Yorkshire. But Kate could have wished a happier look upon her husband's face!

Once in their own room upstairs, that "heart of the house" in which the precious *solitude à deux* could always be found, he took off her pretty hat with the curled grey feathers, handling it as deftly as a woman might have done, unfastened the clasp of her travelling cloak, passed his arm firmly round her shoulders, and thus holding her, close to his heart, close to the breast that henceforth must be her shelter in sorrow, her covert from the storm and the tempest that form part of every life, he told her in a few quiet, exquisitely tender words, that a great soul had passed away across that "unknown sea that runs round all the world."

"It came quite suddenly," he said. "He was sitting in his chair—they were all round him. Oh, my darling! my darling!"

For a moment she had been still, pressing her hands against his shoulders as if to ward off the bitter pain of the blow he had dealt her.

Then she twisted herself from his arms, and threw herself upon the bed face downwards, clutching the pillow.

"He was the tenderest, truest, best," she moaned: "oh, dear Uncle Anthony, shall I never see your face again—never, never again? Was that your last, last message to your Bonnie Kate? You were so faithful to me, dear; you used to tell me when I was wrong, your poor, impulsive Kate, and I am so often wrong—so much, much oftener wrong than anyone else can be. What shall I do? What shall I do?"

Truly theirs was a sad home-coming.

CHAPTER XIV.

HER OWN HOME.

THE reason that we become resigned to the loss of those we love is because that loss—when the chill hand of death claims them—is inevitable.

While hope lasts we struggle. Hope gone, despairing sorrow steps in and has its day.

We lie prone, and the deep waterfloods pass over our soul. The surge of the sea and the sough of the wind are about us and around us.

But the voice that of old said to the winds and the waves, “Peace, be still,” at last makes itself heard above the tumult.

There is a terrible silence on earth, but heaven’s music has a chord the sweeter. It is faint and far off, but now and again we catch its echo amid the throbbing pulses of the life around us.

From the intensity and undisciplined nature of her character, Kate’s sorrow under the blow of General Pierrepont’s death was overwhelming and uncontrollable. Longer than most did she linger in that first passionate stage of grief when neither “ rhyme nor reason ” can aught avail. That he should have died without her near him ; that he should have longed, may be, for the sound of her voice, and the touch of her hand, and longed in vain ; that she, his darling, his own “ Bonnie Kate,” should have been passing through the ordinary routine of an unmarked day at that supreme moment when his noble spirit took its flight from earth for ever—all these reflections, and a thousand more, added to the poignancy of her grief. Violent

gusts of weeping shook her as the blast shakes the young sapling. Not even John could give her any comfort as she passed through that valley of sorrow through which the pathway of her life now led her. And John was very wise.

He did the only thing that those who love us best can do for us at such a time. He let her alone. He did not question her ; he did not probe the cruel wound under the pain of which she was brought low. His heart ached to see his darling thus, but he knew that the crisis was inevitable. The time would come when she would turn to him for sympathy and consolation ; when she would realise that the love that was near must console her for the love she had lost ; but, from the very nature of things, that time was slow in coming. If Kate could have seen Aunt Cynthia, if the two women could have "talked things over," dwelling on every detail, and living over again every moment of sadness and despair, things would have been better. But there seemed little chance of this. What everyone around her had seen only too clearly had been hidden from Miss Cynthia's eyes. In the few blurred and blotted lines she wrote to Kate, after all that was mortal of her beloved brother had been laid in the flower-decked grave at Madeira, she said, "It is the suddenness, the terrible surprise of it, that has broken me down."

Poor Miss Cynthia ! Rudely, indeed, had the bandage been torn from her love-blinded eyes. Swift and unlooked-for had been the blow that had severed the tenderest chord which bound her to life. Her beloved brother's immediate presence taken from her, the whole world seemed to contract itself for her into that one sacred spot where all that was mortal of him lay.

Each little variation in the sick man's state had been a household event. His being a little better or a little worse had made the day bright or gloomy. They had talked over this little change or that in him ; hovered near him to see what each could do. And now the days were one long blank. *He was gone* ; that great, loving heart had ceased to beat ;

those clear, lambent eyes could look on those he loved no more.

No one could help it. It had to be.

Aunt Cynthia could not grasp it ; could not take it in.

In her bewilderment and despair, she clung to the scenes and places where her brother had spent the last days of his life. She would not hear of leaving the island, and Will, of course, could not leave her there alone.

Sorrow and trial had changed bright-eyed Will from a boy to a man. It was he who had written to John, begging him to break the news of her uncle's death to Kate as tenderly as possible. His letter only came to hand the morning the Grangers left Low Cross, and John resolved to keep the bad tidings to himself until Kate should be safe in the shelter of her own home.

There, as we have seen, with his arms around her and her head upon his breast, she learned all the bitter truth. After that she had but to "dree her weird"; helped, indeed, by her husband's quiet, yet ever-present sympathy; still more by his self-restraint in letting her sorrow have its way. After a time she paid a visit to the old home by the river, and John let her go on that drear pilgrimage alone—a piece of wisdom that cost him something, yet was in truth the truest kindness.

At the first sight of Mrs. Dulcimer, Kate broke down altogether; while as to Chloe, that little animal was truly, as Mrs. Dulcimer observed, "out of herself" at sight of Kate. The sable robe and black snood-like bonnet could not deceive Chloe. She grovelled at Kate's feet and kept up a series of quick, short barks, or rather yelps of joy; she licked the cold hand that hung by Kate's side as she sat in the old chair by the window and gazed out upon the river through a mist and rain of tears.

The leaves were falling rapidly; they were drifting in red and yellow heaps into corners; they were floating on the bright ripples of the water.

Their day was over, and it seemed to Kate as if, with them, *all the old sunshine and joy of the home had gone too.*

The boat was snugly ensconced in its little winter house. No more it bobbed up and down so leisurely, or ran its nose into the buttercups and the reeds and rushes.

Yet Kate saw it in her fancy in the old place once more.

She heard the soft crunch of the keel against the pebbly bottom of the river, the rattle of the chain, the bump of the prow against the yielding grass ; she saw Will's face, radiant, laughing, bright, and bonnie ; she saw Aunt Cynthia, dignified as ever, in the stern, with Chloe on the seat beside her, evidently convinced that the boat was taken out daily for her sole benefit, and that the family were merely allowed to accompany her.

How often had they laughed about this idea of Chloe's, while someone watched from the window ! Laughed ? Had they laughed ? How silent now was the laughter !

The water sobbed against the bank ; some little bird gave forth a weak piping now and then, as if asking whether its companions were all flown.

There were no other sounds to break the stillness of the dear old garden, for the sigh of the branches overhead as they stirred gently in the autumn wind, could hardly be called a sound at all.

A rose—the last of all its fellows—blossomed in a sheltered corner of the house.

Kate gathered it, and set it in her breast. Then she kissed Chloe's ball of a head (Chloe's goggle eyes had tears in them, and her tail was all uncurled and limp ; she knew Kate was going), bade Mrs. Dulcimer a kindly farewell, pulled down her veil over her face, and set off bravely towards the station.

Something of the spirit of those who have lived and loved and suffered in a house may perchance linger about it when they are gone. The echo of words long since uttered by lips now cold in death may whisper among the shadows in the old rooms, as the faint wind stirs among the trees of the forest. *It would be impossible to limit the limitless sway of*

association, or the subtle spiritual influences that surround us all on every side like a network, intangible yet electric.

Suffice it to say that on that homeward journey Kate's thoughts, almost in spite of herself, or so it seemed, took a persistent turn.

The past opened like a vista before her, and she saw and recognised things that had been hidden from her. She recognised with a clearness that was startling to her, the grandeur of that self-forgetfulness that had made Anthony Pierrepont the man he was. He had known from the first that for him life was destined to draw quickly to a close. He had kept that knowledge locked within his own bosom. He had kept silence as to his own suffering. When they had talked of hope and brighter days to come, smiling and bending over him as they spoke, he had smiled up into their faces, gently bowing his head as if in assent. For him death held no fears. He knew the God in whom he had believed. Why, then, should he scare those who so dearly loved him because ere long he must set out upon a journey whither they could not follow? Their pain would be keen enough when the day of parting came. Until that day let them find joy in hope. He could not spare them sorrow in the future; he would cheer and sustain them in the present.

A thousand little signs rose up before Kate's memory, and aided her to read this story of a noble past. She was like a person to whom the clue to a plan is suddenly given. She saw with new eyes; she understood with an enlightened mind; and in this new light at length she began to question herself.

Was her own life worthy of the love that noble one had borne her? Was it not rather sodden with selfishness, in that her undisciplined sorrow was leading her to do a wrong to her husband—to the man who had been so tender to her in her grief, so delicate in his effacement of his own individuality so full of thought for her, so empty of thought for himself?

John was working hard, she knew that. He was ambitious, and it seemed that a distinguished career lay before him.

Many long hours did he spend in the cosy little study appropriated to his use, and made wondrously spry and tasteful by Kate's own hands : kept, too, in perfect order by the same deft fingers, so that no servant should disturb or move the papers, and "put aside," as the saying goes, that which it would take an hour to find. For John Granger the weary days of waiting to see if success would come, were over. There was now no sitting in his chambers listening to each footfall on the long-winding stairs in the hope the sounds might stop at his door, and a legal-sounding voice, prompt and business-like, ask for Mr. Granger, barrister-at-law. That nervous occasion, the first session when a man holds a brief, had past and gone. Mr. John Granger had made his mark ; not in a very large way at present, perhaps, but still in a way highly satisfactory to himself, since he began to be "spoken of" among the members of high-standing firms of solicitors, and he never had an idle hour on his hands.

People may sneer as they like at charms of person, voice, and manner, but they are all potent factors in the careers of men and women, opening many a door, and prevailing over many a difficulty. And John Granger had all these. In speaking, his voice was clear, bell-like, and beautifully modulated ; his delivery easy and graceful ; his sentences terse and well put together.

Uncle Toser had not been wrong in making up his mind that his elder nephew had the makings of a clever man in him. The savings of a lifetime had not been ill-invested.

Bulwer Lytton tells us, "Thrones and bread man wins from the aid of others. Fame and a woman's heart he can only gain through himself." Not yet fame—that would come ; but success John Granger had attained, and a woman's heart was his ; both these things he had won for himself.

Kate was as ambitious for her husband as he was for himself. A man who marries a woman of culture and intelligence draws this prize in the lottery of marriage : his wife *does not drag him back, but cheers him on as he goes.* A

clever woman does not want to grasp as much as she can get of a man's life, and strangle it, and choke it with petty greeds and jealous fancies. She knows that her never-failing sympathy in his work and in his ambitions grapples him to her soul with hoops of steel. She has no need to fall back upon lower devices as a lesser woman might. She is a companion of whom he never tires, as well as the woman and the wife whom he loves.

Kate was all these things to John, and more, for he never ceased to feel a certain surprise that she, with all her daintinesses, all her gentle breeding, all her pretty graceful ways, was in very truth his own. That this worship of her reigned in his heart any skilled character-reader might easily have recognised by the chivalry of his manner to her on all occasions. He seemed to fear lest even the breath of heaven should visit her cheeks too roughly. She was something precious exceedingly, set apart, different in his eyes to other women however excellent or beautiful. The consciousness of the one wrong he had been guilty of towards her served to intensify these feelings on his part. He felt that he had so much to make up for. He could never cast aside the memory of how he had seen her suffer through his sin. He was conscious also of a certain treachery in his own conduct towards the great and good man she now so deeply mourned ; towards that gentlest of women, Aunt Cynthia. Even Will's straight-looking bright eyes haunt him at times with a look of reproach. Had he not stolen their "Bonnie Kate" from these dear people under false pretences ? True, it was but by silence that he had misled them ; yet that silence had long since taken the guise of an abjectly cowardly action, one to be regretted through all time, to be expiated by all possible self-abnegation towards Kate and those belonging to her.

Kate was dimly conscious of this attitude of his towards her. She felt the exquisite tenderness of his love, the never-failing thoughtfulness for her even in the smallest thing ; but his one fault towards her she had tried to bury deep down,

out of sight. If it ever obtruded its unwelcome memory upon her she quickly drove the thought away by recalling the words of the dear house-mother : "It was because he loved you so dear."

She said to herself that never again could any root of bitterness grow in her heart towards John for a fault committed for love's sake.

Now, on her journey homewards from that sad visit to a home that was desolate indeed, she began to question herself as to her faults towards her husband, rather than his faults against her. She recalled his hard work at his professional duties ; the weary look in the dear, tender eyes as she stole into his "den" and bade him good-night, knowing full well that it would be the early hours of the morning before he sought rest himself.

"I am sure I must come to something great some day, with you to cheer me on," he had said to her once, with his arms about her, and his eyes alight with joy and pride.

But that was a long while ago, or what seemed like a long while ago, in that dream of theirs by the sea. John had seldom looked so bright and hopeful of late.

Why ?

There was no neglect of his comfort at home. Kate was the kind of woman to whom such neglect would have been a deep and abiding shame. In the matter of household knowledge Miss Libbie had done her a cruel injustice. For all that she could play "The Moonlight Sonata" till you saw in your mind's eye the silvery radiance sweet o'er mead and sea, heard the bright ripples sob along the shore, and the nightingale's note thrill and tremble in an ecstasy of song ; for all that she could arrange groups of flowers so that they looked as if they were sitting as models for panel pictures ; she was yet most accomplished as a plain needlewoman, holding that there was no sewing-machine in the world that could compete with a *woman's fingers*. She could cut French beans so that you could see through each tiny flake, and slice a cucumber to

show the pattern on the dish through its transparent discs. She could even roll butter till it looked like amber ribbon delicately goffered, and might have rivalled Melissa in the fashioning of a toque or the twist of a bow.

These last accomplishments of Kate's had remained a sealed letter to Miss Libbie, who had judged that silence was ignorance, after the way of women of her kind.

It may, however, be taken for granted that John Granger's house was well ordered, since a knowledgeable mistress is apt to make active and capable servants. There was no waste, but there was nothing niggardly. Kate had been no portionless bride. She had a fair income of her own, and took it for granted that everything about her should be the best of its kind. John's earnings were considerable, and steadily increasing; *ergo*, there was no need of stint in any form in the pretty house at West Kensington. It was not only a house—as so many houses are, where care and comfort are unknown quantities—it was a home. John was decidedly to be envied in that respect.

Yet he had seemed less bright and elastic in spirit of late. And Kate, asking the why and the wherefore, found a ready answer in her own conscience.

She had been selfish in her abandonment to an overwhelming grief. It is one of the most prominent characteristics of a great love that it cannot find happiness complete and real save in the happiness of the one beloved. When, after a long day's mental toil, John Granger came back to his home, what he wanted was to find things bright and happy there; and she—sunk in the sorrow that seemed almost heavier than she could bear—had forgotten this.

How gentle he had been to her—how full of thought and tenderness!

But her thought for him had failed. She had been selfish in her grief; she had been everything most opposed to the teaching of the man who had been to her father, counsellor, and friend. Besides, would she call the sufferer back if she

could? Looking back with the clearer vision now vouchsafed to her, she could see what his pain and weakness had been, could see how his cheerful, patient, endurance had oftentimes blinded those about him to their intensity. Truly she was an unworthy follower in his footsteps—more unworthy still of following in those of the Divine Master he served—He whose footsteps are touched with light, so that we may see them plainly if we look for them.

Kate thought of that ideal love she had set before her eyes when first she met John Granger—the love that was to have no thought of self, that was never to fail, no matter how great the stress laid upon it.

Was life, then, but one long process of setting up ideals and failing to realise them? Was this miserable sense of failure that beset her now only a foretaste of still more failures to come?

Then she let her thoughts wander to some details of the General's last days at Madeira sent to her by her cousin Will. How happily the beauties of the fair island had acted on the sick man's spirits! How pleased he had been watching the little green canaries fluttering in the woods! How he recalled the touching story of the young knight of olden times who fled with his "faire lady-love" from the glitter and glare of the Court, and lived and died in the beautiful island "set in a silver sea"!

"Dear uncle was so bright and happy in those last days that when he passed away from us, suddenly, and with no greater suffering than a long-drawn sigh, and a fixed, eager, upward look in the dear, kind eyes, it hardly seemed like death, but like someone crossing a bright flood, and passing out of sight into some fairer world."

"That was my dream," said Kate, "that bright passing, and I—I have missed its lesson—I have thought only of the cloud of sorrow, and never tried to see its silvery side."

When John came home, she met him in the hall. Standing there among the tall ferns and blossoming chrysanthemums,

she looked, in her plain black dress with the pale rose from the Richmond garden at her throat, quite a different Kate from the sad, drooping woman he had companioned with these many weeks, for there was a little smile upon her lips, and her eyes, though they had tell-tale shadows beneath, were lifted to his with a glad, loving look that told him his home-coming was a sweet and welcome thing.

Autumn days, however bright and fair, soon fade, almost imperceptibly, into winter, and now the long arms of the Virginian creeper hung so many bare brown strings from the balcony of Kate's house, and tapped forlornly on the pane, as if calling attention to their pitiable state ; the flowers in the little garden blackened and died ; there was no leaf on any branch, nor roses anywhere, save little Robin's ruddy breast, as he sat, all puffed out, on the bare linden trees by the gate, and sang Kate a song as dole for the crumbs she scattered on the grass-plot.

Aunt Cynthia's letters from the far-off island—letters that told of sunshine and flowers, of balmy breezes that stirred the blossoms on her brother's grave, of calm blue seas flecked with pretty ochre-tinted sails—seemed like fairy tales read by the winter fire while the wind whistled outside, and the sleet beat upon the snugly-curtained windows.

When Kate paid another visit to Richmond there was not even a leaf floating on the river ; the loosestrife was all mere branches of blackened stems, the king-cups were gone ; and Chloe, shivering and turning up her snub nose at the English weather, after meeting Kate with effusion, nestled in her basket by the fire, and pretended to fall into a dreamless sleep, lest she should be asked to go out for a walk.

"She has the sense of twenty dogs," cried Mrs. Dulcimer, calling Kate's attention to the manœuvre. "She's no more asleep than you or I be, Mrs. Granger ; it's just her artfulness."

At which Chloe opened one sly eye, and glanced at the

speaker as much as to say, "Quite right, old girl ; but it's rather mean of you to expose my little game."

Her second visit to the old home did not sadden Kate as the first had done. Rather it comforted her and strengthened her. She thought more of the radiance of that loving smile that had been wont to greet her there than of the silence that now reigned in the old familiar rooms. She could join in Mrs. Dulcimer's expressions of thankfulness that "Miss Cynthia" was still in a sunny clime, and "Master Will" such a stay and a comfort to her. The new home was clasping Kate close in its loving arms. There she was conscious of a centre of light and warmth that illumined all the world. More than this, she was comforted in her sorrow. She thought more of the bright river and the silver sail of her dream, of the radiance upon the dear loving face, than of the far-off grave and the empty chair.

There were other letters than Aunt Cynthia's to be read by the fireside in the cosy home—letters from Melissa, quaint and sprightly, one that told of the glories of Organ Sunday, the inauguration of the new and amazing instrument presented to the church on the hill by Lord Whimperdale ; the terrible obstinacy of Matthew Goldstraw, who promptly refused to blow the new harmonium because he "didn't believe in it"—as if it were a new article of faith, a sort of infallibility of the Pope being foisted upon him by designing men ; the substitution of a new and younger "blower" ; and Matthew's retreat to the shade of the free seats, with an injured countenance on him, and an obstinate expression of deafness to the melody evolved from the "new-fangled machine," as he chose to call Lord Whimperdale's gift.

There was a postscript to this letter of Melissa's :

"P.S.—The dither is all right."

"Isn't that just like Melissa ?" said Kate, laughing.

"Yes," answered John ; "she is quite a *rara avis in terra* is Miss Sweetapple, and I tell you what it is, Kate : when town wakes up a little in springtime, you must get her to come and stay with you a bit."

Be it understood that Mrs. John Granger had a large circle of friends in London ; clever people, artistic people ; people in high—military—places, who were neither clever nor artistic, but infinitely delightful to know, and charmed to meet the more intellectually gifted order of beings ; but her deep mourning prevented her showing much at present, or enjoying those “off season” social gatherings in London that many of us prefer to the grand burst in the dog days. She was enjoying what might be called a “quiet home time”—a time that made her sometimes feel as if the grand stately motto that was emblazoned round Low Cross Farm—“God’s Providence is my Inheritance”—might well be lettered across the threshold of her Kensington home.

Humbie was almost as good and graphic a correspondent as Melissa.

He, too, told news that interested Kate deeply. A relative of the good Rector’s had died and left that worthy man a small independence ; very small it might have seemed to most people, contemptible to a moneyed man, no doubt, but it made to the Rectory household all the difference between pinching and enjoying. Mrs. Sweetapple had a new dolman, a most stylish thing, with hanging sleeves, embroidered. The Rector bought a stumpy pony, and a basket-trap to hold three. The pony was a useful beast, but had its peculiarities. The Rector was aware of this, and drove, not like Jehu by any means, but warily. He held a rein in each hand, as making mistakes in guidance less imminent ; and since the pony—Bucephalus by name—always inclined to swerve persistently to one side or the other, this attitude gave him a surer leverage. The animal was also apparently a great admirer of fine views, as he would now and then stand stock still, and gaze dreamily at the purple hills on ahead. Occasionally he would walk straight into the hedge by the roadside and stare over that. At such times the Rector made kissing noises with his lips, and called Bucephalus endearing names, such as “*good old fellow*” and the like, but the pony never stirred

until the humour came upon him to do so, not even when Mrs. Sweetapple supplemented the driver's persuasive blandishments by the brisk use of the whip.

"People say," added Humbie—and Kate could well imagine the grin with which he wrote this last piece of information—"that when Miss Melissa drives, the pony never does any of these things."

It made Kate glad at heart to think of the good fortune that had come upon her friends at Low Cross Rectory. Thinking of them brought everything most vividly before her. Hers was one of those memories that retain the finest details of things and people, of time and circumstance, once any impression upon her feelings was made. How well she could recall the sound of Mrs. Sweetapple's powerful organ dominating the lanes and fields; the ringing "How are you?" that seemed to go right through your head, and set all your nerves a-tingle; the Rector's dear, dingy "den," that he had shown her as a particular favour vouchsafed to few; the Rev. Caleb Bud, with his tiresome "garb" and his crow-like way of cawing out his words; Lady Whimperdale's beautiful face; the twins, ruddy and sonsie; and the sound of Humbie's violin in the twilight of the mother's room.

There was plenty for Kate to think about as she sat busy with her needle, embroidering fairy flowers in purest white on fine muslin, destined to adorn who might say what manner of dainty garments?

At last spring began to touch the world into warmth and life.

Snowdrops and crocuses all arow blossomed in Kate's garden, and the man from the nursery-gardens hard by came and looked at them with much satisfaction, assured that he had carried out "the master's" orders as to "planting out the garden" in first-rate style. Then a pale primrose thrust up its lovely face from amid velvety-green leaves, and the violets *in the little three-cornered bed by the steps* opened their blue eyes to the fitful sunshine. Rose-coloured buttons showed

themselves upon the brown, pendent strings before alluded to, and a vast choir of birds sang jubilant in Kensington Gardens and the parks—the thrushes' voices dominating the rest. As to the rooks in the tall trees near the Round Pond, their clamour was deafening, and they appeared not to have a moment to lose in achieving the great business of life—namely, nests and nestlings.

Many a pleasant walk had John and Kate Granger in these lovely London haunts, when the beech trees were newly hung with tiny pale-green leaves, rose-veined, and “the green grass, climbing through the brown,” made a carpet for their feet. The jocund days went tripping by like fair maids in holiday attire, hastening onwards, and pressing forwards towards the summer which beckoned in the blue distance.

There is nothing on earth like the beauty and sweetness of the first warm days of an English spring. We may rail at the climate of our native land as we like—and often with just cause—but these still-shining jewels set in her crown of days ought to make up for much.

The window of Mrs Granger's pleasant morning-room was widely open, and a bee, awakened from his winter sleep by the unusual warmth of the sunshine, was actually buzzing about her window-flowers.

The afternoon post had just come in, and three letters lay on the little table by the fire-place. All bore the Low Cross postmark.

To them enter—as the old dramatists have it—John Granger and his wife.

“Three letters,” said Kate eagerly; “one for you, and two for me.”

She opened number one.

It was just a few cordial lines from Lady Whimperdale to say they hoped soon to come to their house in Berkeley Square for the season, and what a pleasure it would be to her to see Mrs. John Granger again. So far so good; nothing could please Kate better.

The second missive was a dual one, the joint effort of Leah and Ray.

"John—oh John!" said Kate, her face all one ripple of laughter, "do listen to this. Our twins have written to me of their own selves, without anybody knowing, to tell me of the great news."

John had opened his letter, read it, and crumpled it up in his hand. He was staring out of the window, so Kate could not see his face; but she thought his voice sounded rather odd as he said:

"What news?"

"You are what your father calls 'a bit gruffish' this afternoon, John," she said, still laughing, "and I have a real good mind not to tell you what is in the letter; but it is too good to keep. Ray has got a young man."

"A young man!" said John, turning round sharply, astounded at her manner of speech.

"See!" she said. "Is it not droll?"

Then she read from the letter:

"We are both writing to tell you, dear Kate, the greatest news of all. Ray has got a young man; he is the new over-looker at the ironstone works; his name is James Dodd. He comes every Sunday to evening meal. Father says he is the right sort. I wish you were here to see him. I should like him all the better if you liked him too. It is Ray says this—' Rather a jumble,' said Kate, "isn't it? but such a dear, sweet letter for all that! I'm sure I shall like James Dodd."

But John was biting his lip, and stroking his beard hard, a sure sign of annoyance with him. These peculiarities of diction in his belongings tried him more than they did Kate. To her they only seemed parts of a delightful whole, and she took them as a matter of course.

To him they appeared in a different light. They reminded *him* of his sins of omission; of a want of candour which he *should regret all his life*.

"My letter is a strange one, too," he said at last; "it is from Aunt Libbie. Kate, my darling girl, I am so sorry; I would not have had it happen for worlds. She wants to pay us a visit; she wants to see London; it is difficult for me to know how to refuse her."

"Why should we refuse her? Why shouldn't she come?" said Kate, unabashed.

But John looked very grave over it.

CHAPTER XV.

MISS LIBBIE MAKES PREPARATIONS.

THE news that Miss Elizabeth Granger, of the farm, was about to start upon a visit to London town ran through Low Cross village like wildfire. Old men wobbled on shaky legs into one another's cottages, and said :

"Hast heard t' news, how Miss 'Leesabeth from t' farm 's about to mak' a start fer Lunnon ? Eh, bo' it's a gradely distance fer t' likes o' her at her toine o' life to travel by—such like journeyin's be moighty undertakin's fer the loikes o' her, that be they."

At which the rest would shake their heads and look profound, as though the world, indeed, were being turned upside down.

"I be pretty spry on my shanks," said an old fossil, long past work, and evidently going round on what might be described as "his last legs," "bo' I wouldna like to be makin' such a start as you, not I ; and Miss 'Leesabeth, hoo's bin such a stay-at-whoam, I'm danged if I can make owt on 't. Howsomenever, here's wishin' of hoo safe back again, fer tho' hoo's a snarly soart, hoo's bin a handy woman to Thomas Granger an' them lads and lassies sin' his missis took bad when t' crookback wur born—that has hoo."

To this there was a murmur of assent. The pastoral mind is eminently just. If the dark shades in a person's character are boldly limned, the lights must not be forgotten.

Miss Libbie had been moved by many and mingled motives *to offer herself as a visitor to John and his wife.* It is

probable that she did not, or would not, recognise even in her own mind some of these motives. Susie was better than usual ; indeed, a sort of a change seemed to have come over Susie. To a very limited extent she appeared to have more use and life in her limbs. She could "shift" herself in bed more easily, and, propped up with pillows, sit upright for an hour or two at a time. Towards the evening of each day there would appear a little pink spot upon either cheek, the colour of a sunset cloud at the close of a still summer's day. Her eyes were brighter, her voice less feeble.

"We's have Susie walkin' round among us afore we know wheer we are," said the farmer, rubbing his hands and chuckling gleefully. "Hoo be takin' a turn, my lad—takin' a turn round t' corner, as yo' may say." This to Humbie.

But Humbie did not rise quite to the level of his father's hopeful spirit.

"Mother looks brighter," he said, "mostly at nights ; but she's losing flesh, father ; the knuckles of her hands show white as milk."

"Dunna thee set up for a grumbler," answered Thomas Granger, in his "gruffish" voice, and with an aggrieved manner. "Them as looks close for holes is sure to find 'em."

Anyway, the improvement in Susie gave a colour of propriety to Miss Libbie's project of spending a month in the great capital.

"How dost know they'll keep thee for a month ?" said her brother. "How dost know they'll take thee in at all ?"

Miss Libbie feigned deafness.

No letter had arrived as yet in answer to that missive of hers that reached the little house at Kensington that sunny day when the early-wakened bee blundered and buzzed among Kate's geraniums. But the answer arrived at last, and was in every way satisfactory—save one—it was from Mrs. John, not from John himself.

They read it aloud to Susie—that is, Miss Libbie did ; but

Susie seemed to have little to say. Her hands trembled a good deal, and she looked somewhat yearningly at Kate's photograph in its pretty frame upon the table by the bedside.

"I'm full of a mind to think you grudge me this bit of an outin'," said Miss Libbie, drawing herself up painfully straight. "It's nothing but what I might look for in this house, where I've served faithful and slaved night and day for sixteen year an' more."

A firm step along the passage, a rousing voice at the door, and Miss Libbie's diatribe was cut short.

"Ha' done worritin' at t' missis, Libbie," said Thomas Granger. "Conna yo' pack yer duds and gang yer gait wi'out makin' such a fuss an' riot over it ?"

But this appeared impossible to Miss Libbie. For days and days she kept the farmhouse in a ferment that matched that of her own mind.

Not only was the idea of so long and ambitious a journey most exciting to Miss Libbie, but those unrecognised longings of which already mention has been made, fermented ceaselessly in her mind. The brethren of Joseph of old were accused of coming "to see the nakedness of the land." In like manner Miss Libbie had a notion to spy out, not exactly the poverty of the land, but the faultiness and inefficiency with which the land—to use the term as expressing her nephew's household—was governed. We know the pitiable notions she held as to Kate's household capabilities ; the jealous and grudging spirit in which she looked upon every action of "John's wife." She wanted to meet Kate upon fairer ground than the area of Low Cross Farm had furnished. At the farm everything was done for her—"the food put into her mouth," as Miss Libbie expressed it ; but in her own house things would be different entirely. Doubtless there was waste upon all sides—a sinful prodigality and profligacy of provisions which John—blind as a bat where Kate and her doings were concerned—did not *realise or even notice*.

The servants, no doubt, ran wild ; with no sensible supervision, we all know what the household domestic is capable of ; and London servants were—so Miss Libbie had heard—proverbial. She even reasoned herself into (almost) believing that this journey to London was a solemn duty, an effort she owed to John's interests, an exertion of which she must face all the risks for the sake of his domestic comfort and happiness.

Calling to mind the slight, graceful figure of her nephew's wife, the grave, sweet eyes that lit up with laughter so readily, the perfectly-fitting gowns, the dainty gloves, the pretty shoes all delicately embroidered, Miss Libbie was ready to toss her head at the idea of petty household cares and duties having any charm for such an one.

"What does she know ? What does she care ?" she would mutter to herself, as she busied herself over the preparations for her visit south. "Who knows if the lad is well looked to, or well done by ?"

John would always be "the lad" to Miss Libbie, just as Humbie was "the boy." No other "lad," no other "boy," existed for her.

From this standpoint it was a very easy step to looking upon herself as, to a certain extent, a martyr in a holy cause. But egotism is crafty at all times, and not one word did she breathe to any living soul of these aspirations. She looked grave and full of importance, as became one on the brink of a serious undertaking. She conceded much to the needs of life in a fashionable town, and startled the twins by avowing that she should wear her "Sabbath gown" on week-days—an announcement that appeared in their eyes as that of a revolution, and an entire reversal of the order of things, social and domestic.

For once in her life she knew what it was to feel like a heroine. The man at the general shop in the village served her with the air of one who ministers to the great. Some showed a pitying awe of her, as though they held it more than possible she might never return from that distant bourn whither her steps were about ~~about~~ her.

"It's a solemn thing at her time of life to tak' a notion to such a flittin', it be," said Matthew Goldstraw, with an ominous shake of the head, "and I hope nowt harmful may come on't. After t' changes as I've seed at this here blessed church, I'm gloppened at nowt, for we know not what a day may bring forth, an' had best not know. There'll be a mort o' quiet i' the place when Miss Libbie's gone, and Ebenezer won't know hisself wi' no one to worrit him and stir him up, as yo' may say. I doubt if so much rest 'ull suit him, bein' so little used to 't; but, anyway, he'll get it tenfold pressed down into his boosom an' runnin' over, as the Book has it, when hoo comes whoam agen. We's all get a double share, I reckon; she'll be like a giant refreshed, will Miss Libbie. God save us all!"

Perhaps it was just as well the good farmer's sister did not hear this and many another comment on her intended journey. Not that any possible comments would have turned her from her enterprise—she was too set on the thing for that—but none of us like to think that our temporary absence is looked upon as a time of peace and quiet, our return as the signal for a renewal of turmoil.

There was another person beside Matthew Goldstraw who took Miss Libbie's visit to John and his wife very seriously, and that was Melissa. Between these two a sort of armed neutrality had existed for years—that is, ever since Melissa had come to years of discretion, or indiscretion, as the case might be.

"It must be very pleasant to you to think of seeing Mrs. John again," said Melissa, with an air of innocent effusiveness. "She is such a bright creature—so sweet and gentle. I never saw anyone at all like her."

There was no response.

Miss Libbie sat very upright and wooden on the edge of her chair, her small, shrewd eyes meeting Melissa's unflinchingly.

"*Then to see her in her own home . . .*," continued *Melissa*.

A sort of thrill and tremor passed across Miss Libbie's face, but of words spake she none.

Silence in the listener obliges the speaker to a change of subject.

"You'll have a great deal to see in London," said Melissa.

"Yes, I reckon it 'ull take me near all my time to see the shops."

This was a view of London that acted like a cold douche upon Melissa.

"Give my love—my dear love—to Mrs. John," she said as she took leave of Miss Libbie, and set off on her way home.

But Melissa was very grave all the way, and let the brickdust-coloured pony crawl along at his own sweet will. She even forgot his usual two lumps of sugar, when the wizened boy came to lead him round to the shed that was dignified by the name of stable, an omission that caused Bucephalus to maltreat that young budding Jehu by tossing up his head unexpectedly, and almost catching him under the chin.

"Melissa," cried Mrs. Sweetapple, in the voice of an elderly cooing dove, "Mr. Bud has been here, and he was sadly disappointed not to see you."

"Has he! Was he!" replied Melissa, with her foot on the stair. "Why can't he stay at home and look after that parish of his?"

"He didn't make near such a fool of himself as usual," said the Rector calmly, looking up from his book and over his spectacles; "he'll be a capital fellow in a few years' time."

But Melissa was out of hearing. She was pacing up and down the length of her own dainty room, that nestled all among the ivy and the honeysuckle at the top of the house. Her saucy face was saucy no longer; her eyes were brighter even than their bright wont with unshed tears. But, as in a vision, she saw the old farmhouse with its sentinel yew trees—*saw it girdled round about in shining letters with the*

words that had a blessed promise : "God's Providence is My Inheritance."

"Yes," she said, a little strangled sob coming with the words, "it is hers, as it is mine—as it is everyone's. May that dear Providence watch over her and guard her from all ill!"

It must be conceded that the twins were pleased at the prospect of Miss Libbie's temporary absence, since a constant lack of household freedom in little things is apt to be a galling, though but a slight and narrow chain. That they should come and go, work or be idle, walk about or sit still, at their own sweet will, appeared to Leah and Ray as an idea most charming.

As to Mr. James Dodd, the "young man" of whom mention has been already made, he was of opinion that a kind of small millennium was near at hand, and looked forward with concealed but keen delight to taking four cups of tea instead of two at the Sabbath evening meal, and bringing his dog Pilcher into the house-place, even, it might be, invading that holy of holies, the best parlour. Jack was of that noble breed of dogs that scorns the inferiors of the tribe, and would neither molest nor acknowledge Pilcher at any time, so Mr. Dodd had no fear on that score.

If gentle Susan rejoiced meekly in the thought of being less continuously thraped at, and the farmer himself had rebellious schemes of various kinds, such as no red herrings for breakfast, but fresh eggs and hissing rashers every morning instead, neither of them made any sign.

That Miss Libbie prophesied the absolute ruin and destruction of all things in consequence of her own absence went for nothing. The family listened in respectful silence, but appeared to look upon their doom with resignation, not to say complacency.

"You'll know what I am in the house when I'm gone," she said to the twins, and Ray tried to squeeze a tear into her eye, and felt no little self-reproach that the fountain was dry

in spite of all her efforts ; but Leah was bolder, and answered, with a wicked double meaning in her words :

" I'm sure we shall, Aunt Libbie."

Rules were to be strictly kept in Miss Libbie's absence. James Dodd was to come to evening meal on Sabbaths, and on one other evening in the week for an hour or so. He was always to be out of the house by the half hour after nine, and both girls were to keep him company in the house-place after tea. The ill-conditioned brute, Pilcher—that white and liver-coloured demon who once brought a bone into the best parlour, and was found asleep upon an antimacassar of beads and string—a most uncomfortable couch, one would have imagined, unless poor Pilcher were thick-skinned above his fellows—was never to come further than the front-door mat, upon which mat his master was on all occasions to wipe his boots most thoroughly. The rich coating of cream upon the shallow dairy pans was never to be violated for James Dodd's tea, and when the young man took his departure Ray was never to go down to the gate with him, but to take a becoming leave of him in the presence of her family.

To all these behests the twins listened with a proper demureness, though their father set them a sufficiently bad example by whistling in the most heartless manner during Miss Libbie's orations and prophecies of evil.

Yet he was generous in his way ; gave his sister a good lump sum in chinking gold, and told her to " stint hersel' for nowt, bo' mak' the most o' her chance ; for like enoo, at her time o' life, it 'ud be her last jaunt."

That she tied the greater part of this gift in an old stocking, and locked it up in a small, mysterious, and ghastly little cupboard let into the wall in her own room, may easily be imagined.

But she did not fail to make such preparations for a sojourn in the gay capital as seemed good to her, since she knew full well that great occasions demand great and exceptional exertions, and she was not one to fall short of what she believed to be the right thing.

She had the black silk, bought for Andrew Sorryman's wedding twelve years back, turned and sponged with a decoction of green tea ; she had new black bone buttons set from top to bottom of her brown bombazine, and a prickly and aggressive white frill tacked round the neck and sleeves—a sort of frill that made you blink again to look at it, as if its cruel spikes and angles were already in your eyes. She bought a pair of dark, serviceable kid gloves, setting aside those of brown thread that had set all Kate's small white teeth on edge in the long-ago, for travelling purposes. She did not forget a chaste neckerchief or two, being much given to those adornments, folded corner-wise, with the corner down her back, as an adjunct to outdoor costume. She had heard that London was a dressy kind of place, so procured one of these in plum-colour, and another of what the general dealer by the post-office assured her was the real M'Gloskie plaid, whatever that might be. She felt that such preparations as these were due from her to the inhabitants of the great city—a very different place, so she gathered, from Wiffle, or even the market town six miles beyond.

She was perfectly satisfied with herself on the whole, feeling that, while fashion was satisfied, economy had not been lost sight of ; this latter fact would doubtless furnish her with a text for a sermon to that fly-away lass, her nephew John's wife, and also stand before her eyes a silent yet powerful reproach.

Miss Libbie's luggage consisted of a square-built, sturdy-looking hair trunk, apparently suffering from some obstinate species of mange, and looking just now unnaturally giddy and skittish by reason of bearing Miss Libbie's initials in new and shining brass nails upon its lid. A knitting-bag of enormous dimensions also accompanied her, long enough to hold a baby at full length, and containing wool enough to knit socks and neck-scarves for all the parish of Low Cross ; need it be said that a bandbox completed the outfit ?

"No one shall take me for an idle London fine lady," said

Miss Libbie, cramming the wool in with a jerk, and tying the strings of the bag as if she were throttling somebody—at which the farmer opened his mouth wide, and then shut it with a snap, as if to keep back some words that wanted to get out, suddenly bursting out into a loud guffaw that made the very rafters ring.

"Ay—ay, but thou mun have thy fling, my lass, thou mun have thy fling same as t' rest—bo' see to 't they dunna tak' thee for a Lunnon foine lady—see to 't, my lass ; let 'em know thou'rt born and bred i' Low Cross, and not one to tak' up wi' their butterfly ways."

It made the twins feel quite solemn ; just as if they were in church, in fact, with Miss Sweetapple playing the new organ with the "dither" turned on, when Miss Libbie spoke of the disposition of her personal effects in case "anything should happen to her," and she should no more return to Low Cross, except for her mortal remains to be laid beside Uncle Toser and the other occupants of that uncomfortable tomb in the churchyard on the hill.

"It's not like going to Wiffle for a day's shopping, nor even like going to the market town market day with father. It's a different thing such a journey as this I'm takin' upon mysel' now. It's uncertain like ; and it's only right and becomin' in such a case that a body should set in order all their worldly matters, not knowin' what's before them."

Miss Libbie went on to say what was to be done with this and that in case of her own decease, and the twins were soon enough in tears this time, to say nothing of poor Susan, who began bitterly to reproach herself for having given way to secret joy at the thought of her sister-in-law's departure ; the farmer was the only one who showed no faintest sign of sentiment on this trying occasion.

"Hoots-toots, Libbie !" he said, "can't yo' let us be peaccable-like ? What's good o' followin' a funeral round more times than we need ? Isna' once enoo ? We'll do our best by yo' when the time comes, never fear ; but yo're

hale and hearty enoo, my lass, for all yo're one o' the skinny kind. Them sort last t' longest i' my moind, same as a fine pulled wire holds strongest."

At last the day of departure came. It was a bright, sunny morning, and Matthew, waiting with the gig, sniffed the clear and balmy air, and said there was "a touch o' summer about things."

There was, however, a subdued twinkle in his old eyes, and the keen mare never made the journey to Wiffle in less time than when she trotted off with Miss Libbie behind her, and the mangy trunk, bonnet-box, and knitting-bag comfortably packed in under the seat.

Miss Libbie looked very serious, as might one embarking upon some desperate undertaking. The thought of the number of hours she would be in the train was in itself enough to make her thoughtful. There was another element of grave—even of sad—reflection in her present position. For all her fads and her little stingy ways, she did with all her heart—such as it was—love the members of the farm household. Never was a woman whose whole world was more completely circumscribed by that one circle—the circle of home—than Miss Libbie. And she fancied—nay, she was almost sure—no one was really and truly sorry to say good-bye to her that morning.

Had she given all—the all she had to give—and harvested nothing in return? Was it possible that if—that if—she never were to come back, the home-wound would heal over, and presently be quite out of sight, just as the grass and mosses and little creepers had covered up the riven stem of the old tree in the further orchard, that was stricken by the lightning flash, and fell prone with its head laid low? Would she, too, be forgotten, her memory covered up and hidden from sight as quickly?

True, Humbie had come with her to the station; but then, *Humbie was kind to everyone*. He would pick up a crying child in the lane, gather a posy to stay its grief, search and

find a lollipop in the innermost recesses of his pockets ; he would go over hedge and ditch after a foolish strayed lamb, whose helpless mother was bleating out the story of her loss to the gloaming ; even bad people and repellent people came in for a share of Humbie's goodness ; none could pride themselves and peacock themselves on a share of *that*. As they sped through the glad, bright morning, Aunt Libbie's eyes grew red with something else beside the rush of the air as the keen mare went apace.

At Wiffle Miss Libbie was looked at with interest, and attended to with the deep respect due to a member of Farmer Granger's family.

"This be a great start o' your'n, Miss Libbie," said the station-master, touching his cap, and himself graciously bearing the knitting-bag and band-box.

Again the traveller's spirits rose. It is pleasant to be a conspicuous object in the panorama of life for once in a way, but just as the train was starting a cowardly longing to catch hold of Humbie's coat came over Miss Libbie ; her face was puckered as she took his hand in farewell ; she felt very like a plant that has been uprooted and set in a basket to journey to some far and unknown land. But this momentary impulse of tenderness died out with a splutter, like a burnt-out candle, the next moment ; for Humbie, swinging himself on to the step, just found time to say—

"Aunt Libbie—do be good to Kate . . ."

It was venturesome ; perhaps scarcely wise ; but Humbie could not keep the words back.

"Kate—Kate—Kate," thought Miss Libbie, "always Kate—why, the very pulsing of the train seemed to fall into the rhythm, 'Kate, Bonnie Kate . . . Bonnie Kate . . .'"

Very upright in her corner by the window, very patient, very enduring, was Miss Libbie, during that long day's travel. She spoke to no one, though she had at times many companions. When a man let the carriage-window down, and the chill air blew in upon her she never flinched, and never spoke.

She had despised people who were "weakling" and "feckless" all her life ; she wasn't going to begin following their example now. Her hands were cold and her heart was heavy as, at last, the train steamed into the London station.

A moment more and Kate's bright face was seen at the carriage-window ; Aunt Libbie was whisked out on to the platform—where it appeared to her that thousands of people were all talking at once, and more cabs than one can count were all jammed up the one against the other—and an energetic porter had the hair-trunk out of the van in a jiffey.

How sweetly Kate welcomed her ! How beautiful was the sparkling face under the cunningest of all black velvet hats !

Oh yes ; Miss Libbie saw it all—the charm, and the beauty, and the dainty ways and manner. She was no fool, this hardy old woman, born and bred among the Yorkshire hills and wolds. It was only that she prided herself on despising all these outward graces, and felt sore in that they had won over so many that were "kin" to her.

"And where's John got to ?" she said at last, ungraciously enough it must be confessed.

They were crossing London in a decent, respectable conveyance, as it appeared to Miss Libbie, for Kate had had the delicate tact to avoid the sportive hansom—not, indeed, being at all certain that her companion could have been induced to enter such a vehicle.

"John does not get away from his chambers as early as this," she answered, "but you will see him soon, Aunt Libbie."

It was quite a relief to Aunt Libbie to find a grievance thus early in her London career.

There was, however, no fault to find with John's cordial greeting later in the evening, and if the late dinner appeared to her to be decidedly extravagant and suggestive of display, *it must be confessed* she had no fault to find with the cookery. *Besides, no doubt* Kate had purposely ordered more pomp and

circumstance for that particular evening in order to crow over her (Miss Libbie), and make her feel "countrified."

In the drawing-room, where the profusion of flowers caused Miss Libbie a sigh of pity for "poor John's" pocket, plans were spoken of for the morrow.

"You must tell us what you would like to go and see," said that cheery victim—for there was no denying that he looked the picture of happiness.

Miss Libbie, who had put on her mittens as a sort of concession to London prejudices, sat with her hands folded, on the extreme edge of a low tapestry-covered couch.

"If you please, nephew John," she said, "I'd like to go and see the waxworks."

CHAPTER XVI.

GATHERING SHADOWS.

THE spring was gliding into early summer ; the long arms of the Virginia-creeper, clothed with verdure to the tips, swung gently in the fresh, sweet breeze : branches of thorn, white with blossom, were sold at the corners of the London streets ; the hyacinths in Kate's window showed spires of shapely bells, and perfumed all the air.

It was more than a month now since Miss Libbie came south, yet there was no word of her returning to the shades of Low Cross. Neither did any urgent entreaties for her return wing their way from the farm.

Truth to tell, a certain sunny calmness pervaded the old homestead, as of still summer weather, when no breeze stirs the leaf on the tree, and over all Nature seems written the one sweet word of healing—peace.

Everyone did that which was right in his or her own eyes : James Dodd came and went as he “had a mind” ; while as to Pilcher, everyone had clean forgotten that that wily animal had ever been condemned to durance vile on the door mat in the passage. Pilcher now walked into the house-place, or even penetrated, “Sabbaths,” into the best parlour, as though the whole place belonged to him, and no one thought to chide him. Jack got so used to him that, being a large-minded dog without any petty jealousies, he would greet him with dignified pleasure, and even allow him to assist in teasing *the black kitten*, now rapidly becoming a cat. He could

not, however, sympathise with his new friend's taste for rats, and would turn away as if from some plebeian sight when Pilcher would be worrying the carcass of an unfortunate, or bearing it proudly aloft as a trophy of his prowess.

At first, after Miss Libbie went away, the twins were half afraid of so much liberty ; but mother seemed to enjoy it too, and that gave them heart. The farmer himself began to forget his former bonds, and rampaged in a wonderful manner among the victuals at breakfast, ordering in eggs and rashers in a way that made the serving-maiden's hair stand on end.

"We've never had red-herrings but once—no, but twice, since Aunt Libbie went away," said Leah, one morning, laying down her knife and fork, and looking with big round eyes at her father.

"Does that be so ?" he answered, a broad grin on his jolly face. "Well, my lass, we won't have no more neither till she comes back again."

So all went merry as a marriage-bell, and even the speckled hen took advantage of the general licence, laid away, and presently emerged from some woodland retreat proudly leading forth a cloud of witnesses in the form of little fluffy golden chicks, who darted here and there through the long grass, or gathered about the clucking mother with wild cheeps and flutterings. Miss Libbie would never have allowed such an irregularity as this ; but the speckled hen was like all the rest of the Low Cross household, given over to a reckless condition of anarchy and daring.

As for Ebenezer, Matthew was heard to say, "he'd never be got under no more i' this warld!"—thus leaving a dark suggestion of possible subjection in a lurid future.

They were still all satisfied as to "mother's" state—all but Humbie. He seemed more than ever to spend his time in the white-curtained room, where you went up a step to the window and looked through a veil of fuchsias into the garden beneath. His low, melodious voice was oftener than ever heard reading the story of the dear loving Christ,

who was so pitiful to the suffering, so tender to the weary and the heavy-laden. The mother and son did not talk much. It seemed their hearts and thoughts were so much attuned to the same strain, that they understood each other without words. Sometimes Humbie would look up from the page whereon the still shining of The Light of the World makes all things bright, and with the sublimest of words upon his lips keep silence a moment, while the mother's eyes—surely growing more spiritual and etherealised day by day!—met his, and the loving fingers closed gently about his own.

One night Mrs. Granger looked up into Humbie's face as he was bidding her good-night, and the look held him.

"What is it, dear?" he said, bending over her and speaking with a protecting fondness that seemed to reverse their relative ages, and was always passing sweet to her.

She put up her hand and touched his face.

"I wish Kate would write oftener and longer. I think on her many a time and oft. In the still night watches, when t' pain wunna let me sleep, I think on her till I see her sweet face in the darkness, same as yo' moight see a picter on a bit o' paper. I've seen her smile at me more nor onct; bo' the tear wur on her cheek, and her eyes kinder solemn; and onct I seemed to hear her sigh—oh, such a rendin' sigh!—fair fit to burst her gentle heart. Sick folk ha' strange enoo fancies—that have they—and I've a mind to think God speaks to them more nor He do to other folk, and comes nigher to them—happen through strange signs and visions that none other can read. I'd fain hope there's no sore trouble come to Kate, lad—I'd fain hope so; bo' Libbie's bin gone a long time, an' she'd no mind to her—no mind to her. I'm not saying bo' what it's bin kinder still here, and peaceful-like—a'most same as tho' a' the days were Sabbaths; bo' I've a mind to think it's no right to feel that way; for what would t' father and t' childer ha' done i' *days past wi'out Libbie?*

"It's the memory of that," said Humbie, "that gives

her a welcome from John ; but I wish she was home, mother. The tears came bright into Miss Melissa's eyes when she asked me but yesterday if we'd good news of Mrs. John, and I had to say how long it was since Kate had written more than a line or two."

"Ah," said Mrs. Granger, with a happy sigh, "she never forgets the letter I long fer Sabbath mornin's, the dear, fond lass ! It comes with the ringing of the bells she used to love to hearken to."

Meanwhile what of Kate—Bonnie Kate ? Let me answer in a parable :

When first a railway was projected to the fair city of Oxford, so vehement was the prejudice against the notion among many that a certain man imitated the example of the energetic Balbus, and set to building himself a wall to shut out effectually from his domain the sight of the hateful iron monster passing to and fro.

This was all very well, but the whirr of the wheels, the rush of the steam, the shriek from the brazen throat—what of these ?

Kate was engaged in building a mental wall to hide from her eyes ugly and unwelcome facts.

She succeeded after a fashion in blinding herself, but the signs that were in the air around her could not be shut out from ear and brain. There was a change over that world of hers in which she had reigned so royally and loved so fondly.

There was a change in herself ; a bitter, cruel change ; a change being wrought slowly, as the sluggish tide creeps up the sand-bank, but as surely swamping and submerging. She, so open and confiding, was growing suspicious. It grew harder and harder to speak frankly and freely to John ; reserve and silence on one subject begat reserve and silence on others.

Any woman worth her weight in salt, let alone in gold, will

be driven hard, indeed, before she complains to her husband of his own people. To Kate, noble even in her faults, what savoured of meanness was impossible ; and the hard-headed north-country woman, Thomas Granger's sister, had shrewdness and tact enough to keep the surface of things more than tolerably smooth in the presence of the master of the house, and to trade upon her own instinctive knowledge that a true gentlewoman like Kate was, of necessity, obliged to be gracious and courteous at the head of her own table, and in her own house, no matter how much she might be conscious of lurking and determined antagonism. Let it be said, once for all, that Miss Libbie had no intention of playing the despicable part she was now filling when first she came to the house in Kensington. She had expected to find Kate faulty and ignorant in household matters, and had cuddled and petted the idea of triumphing over her in the strength of her own vast and superior skill. But the brutish instinct of the creature that seeks and hunts down was upon Miss Libbie.

The hoarded jealousies of the days at Low Cross—an evil store—were turned over and over in her mind ; turned and re-turned. Perhaps the daily and hourly spectacle of John's devotion to his wife added a sting to the bitterness that was gathering about Miss Libbie's heart, and grew with what it fed on.

Even poor Humbie's farewell words rose up to add to the discord of her thoughts. Never was a poor human being so tossed and tumbled with the turmoil of her own feelings as Miss Libbie. In every smallest way Kate studied to please her ; consulted her on all possible and impossible occasions ; and yet there were times when Miss Libbie worked herself up into a sort of frenzy of indignation because of fancied slights. If reason then reminded her that the way out of the said slights was an open one, and led straight back to Low Cross and its more congenial surroundings, she *would say to herself*, with an angry woman's absolute

unreasonableness : "I won't—I won't—I won't be driven away from my own nephew's house!"

When she had written to John first about this visit to London, she had put it that through long years of hard thinking and hard working she had had no change of scene, no holiday worth speaking of, and now, Susie being at her "bettermost," and the girls grown old enough to keep house—after a fashion—a chance had come about that might never come again. She shouldn't like to die without having seen London ; she was sure her dear nephew John would be glad to welcome her under his roof ; remembering, as he must, how for many a long year she had been a mother to him in all but the name.

Well, her nephew John had welcomed her to his own home ; and her nephew John's wife, Kate, had welcomed her, and by way of returning this kindness and affection, she was making the said Kate as miserable as one woman could make another, and it is only a woman who knows what that means.

It seemed to Kate as if long ages had passed since the day when she took Miss Libbie, arrayed in the kerchief of the real M'Gloskie plaid, to see the waxworks ; in other words, when the two spent a long two hours among Madame Tussaud's admirable effigies, and even at the expiration of that time it was difficult to get Miss Libbie away. How the sight of unhappy Mary Stuart with rosary and crucifix caused Miss Libbie to give utterance to various stern denunciations of "Papists" and their idolatrous ways, to the amazement of the bystanders, and the dire confusion of Mrs. John Granger ; how at first she could not be persuaded that the figures around her were not alive, and kept touching them to make sure of things, so that Kate glances round for fear a policeman might be near, all this may be imagined.

But these small trials, and others akin to them, had grown to be as mere specks of discontent. The steady antagonism of days that, naturally, the two women were compelled to

spend together from early morn to dewy eve, galled like the strain and pressure of a tight-drawn chain.

John had been full of fears that Miss Libbie's uncultured, plain, north-country ways would place Kate awkwardly, and offend his own sense of the fitness of things ; but it was wonderful how, again, the keen brain and native shrewdness of the Yorkshire woman triumphed over difficulties. Miss Libbie grasped the truth that silence was golden, and a woman who will hold her tongue may pass muster in almost any society in London ; while as to dress, no one takes much notice of that, where variety is infinite, and wit counts far more than any costume by Worth. Besides, in London, more especially among a set sprinkled with artistic and literary people, eccentric people abound, and a Roman toga would hardly cause more comment than that it might be taken for granted the wearer found some satisfaction in sporting it, while a peculiar mode of dressing the hair might be supposed to indicate an inclination towards the Chinese or Japanese "attitude." There is surely no place in the world where such absolute liberty as to dress and coiffure exists as in London.

One lady, a person of talent and of great influence in her special coterie, screwed her eye-glass into her eye, "took in" Miss Libbie's *tout ensemble*, and declared her to be an "interesting kind of creature" ; another woman immediately followed suit and declared she was "delightfully fresh."

This sort of thing soon spreads, and never in her quiet and uneventful life had the recluse of Low Cross Farm had so much attention paid to her as an individual. It didn't, perhaps, amount to much in the aggregate, since Kate was going out but little ; still, people came to call, and a few quiet receptions at artistic houses appeared to Miss Libbie as a perfect whirl and vortex of dissipation, that would last her the rest of her life to talk of.

Neither did the General's friends do otherwise than find Miss Libbie charming in her own way.

Everybody had eccentric friends of some sort, and eccentric people were ever so much nicer than stupid people, so they reasoned.

People of the military persuasion are of all folks most cosmopolitan, and not in the least given to be curious. Never having to assert themselves, and used to drifting from one country and society to another, having to make the pleasures and happiness of their lives from all sorts of materials, their own status, meanwhile, being too clearly and sharply defined to call for thought or timidity, they gaily cull each passing or possible pleasure and amusement, leaving the searching question of "Who's who?" to others to answer and define.

One old General, with wicked, twinkling eyes, and a moustache like a *chevaux de frise* declared himself in his own family circle decidedly *épris* of Miss Granger, christened her his "Phyllis," his "only joy," and paid her florid compliments in the old style, to which she replied with prim, yet not unpleased dignity, and presently appeared with a smart little affair, made of black velvet and lace, on the top of her head, looking, as John roundly declared, as if a huge butterfly had lighted there with expanded wings. No wonder Miss Libbie did not want to return to Low Cross.

"I was afraid Aunt Libbie's peculiarities would make things very unpleasant for you, Kate," said John. "I was very unwilling she should come at all. One could not have supposed she would settle down so well, could one?"

"One could not indeed."

Kate spoke very quietly, but she did not look at her husband; she looked steadily out at the linden trees now laden with leaves. She stood by the window, her hands, lightly folded, drooping against her black dress.

"You have been very good to her," said John, who was bending over a paper, talking as he read.

"I have tried to be."

"It is such a change from that still, grey life of hers

up north ; it seems some little return for all those years of ‘toiling and moiling,’ as she would call it. She has been hard with us all at times, has Aunt Libbie, most of all with my mother ; but her heart is in the right place ; she would go through fire and water for any of us any time.”

“I am sure, John, that her life is one long devotion to all of you.”

He did not notice that she said “you,” not “us.” He was absorbed just about this time in the prospect of a more than usually important “case” that was coming on, and in which he was engaged as junior counsel. He was not one whit less tender, not one whit less loving, but he was less observant of little things, and had grown to think that, after all, it was by no means a bad thing that Kate should have some companion in the long days when he was of necessity away from her ; and, things having turned out so much better than he had anticipated, his fears having proved so groundless, he saw no reason why Miss Libbie should not stay a while longer, the more so since no one from the farm wrote to urge her return. It had been a great trouble to John Granger that Miss Libbie should have “taken against” his wife, as she had seemed to do from the very first. He was glad things were smoother now. Of course Kate would win over anyone if she only had the chance ; no one save a fiend in human form could resist her, and Aunt Libbie was not that. She was a very tiresome, cross old woman at times ; he had no doubt that the good folks at home were rejoicing in unwonted liberty ; still, she was a woman of “sterling qualities,” she had held the household cords together when otherwise they might have dropped asunder, or got hopelessly entangled—held them when the dear hand whose right it was to guide and control, was smitten helpless, and—oh, how unwillingly—had to let them fall.

So John Granger went on his way rejoicing, throwing himself with ever-increasing energy more and more into his

professional work, finding an intense interest in it, making new and influential friends day by day; telling Kate of his triumphs and his toil, and receiving from her a never-failing sympathy—a most tender appreciation of all his aspirations and ambitions.

He was often now detained late at his chambers, and was glad to remember that Kate was not alone. It was delightful to him to think how well the two women got on together—delightful to feel that the clouds he had feared to be threatening had cleared harmlessly away, and given place to calm sunshine.

If anyone had cried in his ear, “Blind! blind! blind!” he would not have heeded the message, or known why such a message should be given to him.

Meanwhile, Kate toiled to keep the wall she was building between herself and what she fain would hide away from sight, high enough to be a most effectual shield. She would not let herself acknowledge even to her own heart that she had an enemy within her gates. She would oppose her wall of determination against hard and stubborn facts. But the atmosphere above and about her could not be shut out, and it was filled with ominous sounds. From morning till night it was Miss Libbie’s one determined effort to make Kate feel herself in the wrong.

From the sheltered life she had hitherto led, from the love and tenderness that had ever surrounded her, the girl—for she was only that still—had few weapons to bring against persistent unkindness and misconstruction. She even grew confused in her own mind as to the reality of things; the sight of her mind’s eye grew misty and blurred; she began to reason with herself that if Miss Libbie really thought her so wrong, so lacking, so heedless in this, that, or the other, grave faults must in very truth exist. It is wonderful to what an extent, by perpetually treating a person as if they were *acting from a bad motive*, it is possible to create in that

person a sort of belief in the existence of the motives imputed to them. Self-suspicion became engendered in Kate's mind, and the next step was to watch her husband for signs of suppressed dissatisfaction with her. Aunt Libbie's insinuations were vague, too; they might mean anything if imagination were once let loose.

"Of course he's bin used to things so different, has John. He was never one to complain, wasn't John; he'd feel a thing hurt ever so long, and keep a stil tongue i' s head, would John."

"But what should hurt him?" Kate would answer, her pretty brows puckered, her eyes wistful, pleading, puzzled.

"Oh, I don't say as anything does. I only say he's one as would never speak. If he's a mind to think as there's a deal more fritterin's here than need be for a man wi' his way to make, and happen a family to come on, he'll never say owt."

"Fritterings!" said Kate, red as any rose, after Miss Libbie's plain way of indicating the possible future claims of a day to come; "do you mean by that to hint that I am extravagant?"

"Well," said Miss Libbie, pursing up her mouth as if a difficult stitch in her knitting came about just then, "I think there's things you might do wi'out, and I've a mind to think John thinks so too."

"John thinks so!" said Kate, a lily now instead of a rose. "Did he tell you so, Aunt Libbie? If he did, do not hide it from me—do not—do not!"

She crossed the room to Miss Libbie's side. She was eager, flushed, trembling. It was the first time anyone had ever even hinted to her that John could feel dissatisfied with what she did. It was bitter, and yet, she thought, chiding herself as though she were a wayward child, "How foolish of me—I, who have so many faults—is it not only natural he should see through them, as others do? And yet—and yet—*Oh, if he had only told me himself!*"

Then came the memory of loving words, as one recalls a strain of sweet, sad music, hearing it again in fancy :

“ It was because he loved you so dear.”

Was it true then that John loved her too much to be candid with her ?

“ Did John speak of this to you, Aunt Libbie ? ” she said at last, after a silence during which that dame had cast an uneasy glance or two at her niece’s face.

“ He said no hard words of you,” replied Aunt Libbie, who felt as if the truth were being drawn unwillingly out of her, as a tooth might have been ; “ he said you’d bin used to fancy things about you—not bin brought up hard and plain same as himself.”

It was true then : John had thought her in fault, and had not told her so—had encouraged her—yes—Kate would not lie even to herself—encouraged her to surround herself and him with a thousand things not really needed, but yet things that made life pleasant. He had felt these things to be extravagances, and had thought of her as a spoiled child, who could not bear to have a wish ungratified. He had gone against his own conscience to please her. It was humiliating to be treated thus—she, who prided herself upon being his helpmeet, his companion, friend.

“ I only speak for your own good,” said Miss Libbie, not by any means at ease as to the wisdom of the step she had taken ; “ and you’ll keep it close from John ? I reckon he’d be hard wi’ me if he knew I’d vexed you.”

“ You need not be afraid,” said Kate, her head held high, her eyes bright with indignant pride ; “ it is not likely I should try to make mischief for a guest under my roof.”

“ No gentlewoman would do such a thing as that,” she was about to add, but caught herself up dexterously.

It would indeed, she felt, have been unworthy of her to let fly such an arrow as that at Miss Libbie, though perhaps its full sting would hardly have told.

Then this generous, faulty, passionate Kate began to plead

her own cause. A most sweet Portia might she well have made, standing there in the golden summer haze, one hand resting on the table, the other pressed against her breast, crowned with her coronal of burnished hair.

"I want to ask you one thing, Aunt Libbie : if you see anything that I do that vexes John, will you tell me—will you speak to me? I can see all the truth of what you say ; I can see that you must know him better, in many ways, than I do, for you have known him from a boy—seen him slowly grow to a man—and studied him, I do not doubt, with anxious eyes. You have the advantage of me in time, Aunt Libbie"—this with a pitiful, small smile—"but not in loving—no one can have that. Do you know when first I met him it was like coming across some new and wonderful light—it was a thing that changed all the world. I used to fancy that I must deceive myself—that it was impossible he should care so much for me as I was ready to fancy. I used to try and put him from my thoughts, since they clung to him too closely ; but it was a poor effort, Aunt Libbie. His voice seemed always in my ears, even when he was not near me. Once he told me that he liked a certain dress I wore—I stroked it with my fingers afterwards, I kissed its folds ; I have it still, folded and put away, with bits of rosemary laid here and there—that's for remembrance."

Kate was dreamy-eyed now, and her lips were pale and tremulous—a passionate, fond Juliet, rather than a Portia.

She was living it all over again : the sweet uncertainty—the trouble that yet held a subtle thrill of pleasure in its pain—the solving of that problem that Gretchen puzzled over to her sad undoing : "He loves me—he loves me not—he loves me !"

The strength and purity of Kate's womanhood had never been frittered away and diluted by those empty follies, that shallow, desecrating, idle chatter of love and lovers that besets the opening years of some women, thrown into unworthy companionship, either of books, or men and women.

Juliet's white flame of pure and concentrated passion; Katherine's haughty soul, tamed to the full devotion to her lord; Elaine's sweet death in life for dear love's sake; Evangeline's long, patient, uncomplaining quest—these and such models had she taken for her fancy, to cling about and work upon, so when her own time came, when she heard the voice that made her heart's sweet music, felt the touch of the hand and lip that thrilled her through and through, and taught her what love was, she gave her whole unquestioning allegiance to the new tyrant, whose tyranny was rapture. She forgot that even the man she loved must needs be faulty like the rest of human kind. She dressed his image up in the fair gauds of her own fancy, and set him on a pedestal so high that her eye, dazzled by the distance, could not see or measure true.

Then came this idol's sin against her, and the quick rebound from an over-sure security. This sin Kate resented more hotly, it may be, than a shallower woman would have done. She who risks all loses more than one more crafty, one who has more "cunning to be strange"; and Kate was not one to keep anything back, to give with niggard, grudging hand. She had opened both her pretty palms, and cast her life, her love, her service at her lover's feet. That he should stoop to gather up the gifts and wear them next his heart—that was all she asked.

And so he did, but as we wear our rue, "with a difference."

She had pardoned and condoned that "difference" now; it was a sin sinned for love's sake, the easiest sin for love to pardon; it was a wrong done "because he loved her so dear."

But yet it had been a sort of failure; a sort of falling off at the very beginning of that story of a dual life, whose initial letter was the dream beside the sun-bright sea.

And now yet another failure, but only a ripple this time, not a storm upon the river of her life—yet disquieting.

It cannot be said that Kate, pouring forth the innocent

story of her heart's awakening, had wisely chosen Miss Libbie as a confidante.

Miss Libbie's ideas of love and marriage were decidedly primitive. People "kept company," "walked out together," and then, if the family on either side approved, a wedding resulted. Every respectable woman loved her husband and her children, kept a thrifty house, and gave the master thereof a line of her mind if he stayed out late of nights, or walked up the front path in an undecided line when he came home from work or market.

There was amaze as well as keen and cutting disapproval in Miss Libbie's small, grey eyes as she listened to Kate's pleading for fair and open dealing, and sympathy in the love that was the core and heart of her life.

But Kate, unconscious of antagonism in the air, carried away as usual by the influence and impulse of the moment, spoke on.

"I prayed, oh, so hard and so often to be made wise for John's sake ; being so young I feared myself."

Miss Libbie was on firmer ground now. To use a homely phrase, she "felt her feet." Hitherto they had been, metaphorically, kicking in the air.

"You wur right there," she said, nodding her head till the black velvet butterfly resting there seemed preening its wings for flight. "A slip of a lass like you couldna' fail to make a bad fist at keeping house, and John, too, used to such careful ways. You needed a spell more years over your head, Kate."

"But John wanted me. I could not——" began John's wife, then, hesitated, being in a great wonderment at the turn matters were taking ; "you see, Aunt Libbie, he had to take me as I was," she said at last, with a pretty, self-deprecating little laugh.

"I wasna' thinkin' of our John," replied Miss Libbie ; "I was meanin' you'd best have waited for someone more of your *own way of thinkin'*, and as had been reared same way

and used to flinging money about on all manner of fal-lals, and made dishes, and such like from his youth upwards. It's a pity yo' took up wi' John at all—Susie wur right enoo there. Like to like, that's how things had ought to be i' this world."

Then, with one look at Kate's stricken face, Miss Libbie gathered her wools and pins into her bag, and sought the refuge of her own room.

CHAPTER XVII.

“WILLIE, IS IT YOU, DEAR—SAFE, SAFE AT HOME?”

KATE'S wall of defence lay in ruins. She had patched it, replaced a brick here and there, closed her eyes to gaps that showed her a dreaded prospect, but at last it fell. Misconstrue a person often enough, and they begin to misconstrue themselves. She looked back upon the past, and even there found wrongful motives. She had been self-centred, grasping happiness without sufficient reflection. The glamour of a sudden passionate love had been allowed to blind the eyes of her mind. She should have had herself more thoroughly in hand, waited longer, learned more of the life and character of the man she loved before she let him bind himself to her irrevocably.

Then, perhaps, she might have found out that her ways and ideas needed mercilessly pruning before she could be fit to make John Granger happy as his wife. Thus ran the current of her distorted thoughts.

Once fairly caught and entangled in the meshes of morbid and concentrated introspection, what soul is safe?

All the unhealthy fanaticism that has ever cursed the world, and stunted the lives of men, arises from this poisoned root. Perhaps under ordinary circumstances Kate would have better preserved the control and balance of her mind ; but, just now, her health was variable, her nervous system easily played upon ; to her fevered imagination molehills became mountains ; mere ripples on the surface gathered all the force and storm of *tidal waves*.

She did not doubt John’s love for her ; she could not doubt that. Love lights up electric sympathies that cannot play one false. He loved her, she was his darling, his Bonnie Kate, yet a jewel that had cost him dear ; for his ways were not her ways ; when she tried to please him best, she crossed him most. He would not even tell her in what ways she tried him. He was too tender, too chivalrous for that. He had not the strength to be candid with her. What was it Aunt Libbie had said ?

“He was never one to say much, wasn’t John. He was one to keep a still tongue all through, was John.”

Aunt Libbie had said something else ; something that had cut and stung ; something that had touched and pierced a very tender place in Kate’s heart. If there was one stronghold in the farm household which Kate had believed herself to hold in full possession, it was the heart of the gentle, suffering mother. If no one else understood her, *that* dear soul was one with hers. And yet—and yet—and yet ! Oh, the misery of fancying someone—friend, sister, husband, lover, be it who it may—stands with us hand to hand and soul to soul, and then, in a moment, learning that the loyalty we cherished is not the flawless thing we thought !

Is there any pain like unto it, my friends ?

We have deemed this precious diamond of ours—this friendship, this love with which no earthly gem could vie—a jewel of the clearest, purest water ; and lo ! there, in its very heart of hearts, is a speck, a flaw, a blemish. We have given so much, we would fain have hoped for all in return ; but something has been withheld. Where we have looked for perfect candour, behold reserve ; where we have imagined harmony, perfect and complete, behold a jarring note.

“If she had only told me ; if she had only spoken straight out of her heart !”

Thus reasoned rebellious Kate, thinking of John’s mother, but even as she pondered it seemed as though the clear, spiritualised eyes met hers full of tender reproaches, as if *the gentle voice whispered in her ear :*

"It was because he loved you so dear—loved you so dear—loved you so dear."

How strange that John's mother could speak like that and yet feel the marriage had better not have been, and yet said that "like were best to link with like!"

Ah well! perhaps the kindly soul thought to try and make the best of matters, and smooth everything over for John's sake.

How could honest-hearted Kate imagine that Miss Libbie, thraping to Susie over some household matters that she chose to fancy Kate was "put out over," had said, with peevish spite, "Like should wed with like, and happen then there'd be none o' this," while Susie—poor innocent Susie—thinking of the wrong that John had done to Kate, sighed, and answered, with her face turned from the light, "May be, may be——"

If any regret lurked beneath that sad "may be," it was for Kate, not for John; but how could John's wife know this, since there was none near to tell her?

It would be dealing out hard measure to Miss Libbie to say that she deliberately falsified and made capital out of what had passed. There is every reason to believe she had fully persuaded herself that Susie's mind was of the same tune as her own as regarded John's marriage. She had not thought so at the time; on the contrary, she had known the reverse; but she was now too full of prejudice and jealousy to see anything in a true light. As has been said before, the brute instinct that hunts down its prey was upon her. If the look on Kate's face as that poisoned dart was flung gave her a moment's pang of remorse she stifled it quickly, though not without a sharp, if short, struggle. For—would it be believed?—Miss Libbie, when alone in her comfortable room, had one swift impulse of compunction, urging her to flight from the scene of battle. She even went so far as to open a drawer and pull the little mangy hair-trunk from its retirement under *the pink-lined* petticoat of the dressing-table.

A little while the good and evil spirits—in other words, the good and evil impulses—fought in the narrow heart.

Then Miss Libbie sat down with a flump (no other word expresses it), and the bad spirit got the upper hand and held it.

"I won't—I won't—I *won't* be driven out of my own nephew John's house!" said Miss Libbie.

From which it may be seen that salvation was very far from that good lady, and that neither right nor reason could appeal to her—at all events, loud enough to be heard. A more absolutely perverted mind than hers, at this juncture, it would be difficult to imagine.

Kate knew nothing of that strangled impulse, nothing of that ghost of a chance of deliverance from the tyranny that pressed upon her.

She only knew that the strain never slackened; that the very fountains of her life seemed poisoned. All spontaneity of feeling and action died out in her. The misery and self-consciousness of perpetual self-watchfulness were hers. She who had hitherto never dwelt upon herself at all now found the whole world full of nothing else. All the dignity and daring of manhood or womanhood is soon sapped out of a creature thus environed.

Even the thought of her husband's love became a source of troubled and disordered imagination to Kate at this most wretched time.

Because he so loved her he treated her like a spoilt child; set aside his own wishes, ideas, and feelings in order that no whim of hers might be thwarted, no fad or fancy go unsatisfied. In a day to come she could look back upon these self-torturings as one in health looks back upon the wandering of delirium; but at the time they were very real to her.

And Aunt Libbie was always by to turn her thoughts in upon herself.

"You know I told yo' John wasna' one to say much. If yo' think on all the time you've known him, yo'll see I'm in the right of it."

It was wonderful, too, how the reins of household government began to slacken in Kate's fingers. There was grumbling in the kitchen at first, and Miss Libbie's presence there was looked upon as a combined injury and insult. But the old Yorkshirewoman was a capable hand, and "got round" everyone, bringing about changes in the *ménage* that gladdened her own heart, and doubtless lessened the weekly expenditure by no mean figure.

"John says you're to be spared every way as can be," said Miss Libbie.

And John himself, in the innocence of his heart, told Kate how glad he was to see that Aunt Libbie made herself useful, in which idea Kate, with a growing conviction of her own insufficiencies, quietly acquiesced.

Once John, looking observantly round the drawing-room, noticed a difference somewhere.

"Ah!" he said at last, turning to Kate with that sweet sudden smile that had first won her untutored heart; "I know what it is—you haven't got so many pretty flowers about as you usually have. Kate, I like to see you with flowers about you; you seem made for them, and they for you."

Miss Libbie kept a masterly silence. Her knitting, now resolving itself into a bed-quilt of abnormal dimensions, absorbed her so completely that she was apparently as deaf as a post. She had perfect faith in Kate's discretion—no fear of her own part in the scarcity of blossoms in the pretty drawing-room being blurted out to set John in a rage.

As for Kate, she slipped her hand into her husband's, and to his wonderment he saw that the dear, brown eyes raised to his were all wet with unshed tears. Had they been alone he would have had her in his arms in a moment and kissed that dewy brightness away. But the upright figure, seated primly by the shaded lamp, with busy mittened hands and head held straight as a soldier's at "attention," acted as an effectual *deterrent*.

"I shall see the man at the nursery gardens myself to-morrow," said John, squeezing hard the fingers that felt strangely chill in his, "and order what I like, or rather what I think you will like, my darling. Aunt Libbie," this with a rallying smile at the industrious knitter, "if you are going to turn housekeeper to let Kate be an idle fine lady, you must look after the flower-department a little better than this, or you and I shall quarrel."

"I'm not over fond of too many blossoms in a room, nephew John," said Miss Libbie; "they're not counted healthy in our parts."

But afterwards, when the two women were alone, Miss Libbie put quite a different construction on this incident altogether.

"Yo' see, he conna' abear to ha' yo' crossed," she said to Kate, falling into the broadest Yorkshire, as was her wont in moments of excitement. "He knows as well as yo' and I do what a mort o' money them blossoms run away with—bo' he wur always same as that, wur John; he'd bring himself to bear ony mortal thing sooner than fret a body, would John. I've known him, when he wur a boy, stint himsel' and save the halfpence bit by bit to buy summat as Susie had a mind to, and he'd come snugglin' up to me, and, 'Aunt Libbie,' he'd say, 'dunnot you say a word as I stinted mysel' to get it; hoo'd break her heart over it, that would hoo.' Eh, bo' it's a true sayin', 'like boy, like man.'"

As for Kate, a tear stole down her cheek, and had to be furtively wiped away, as Miss Libbie spoke.

After all, then, that was it; John thought of her as a spoilt child, whose fancies must be gratified at any cost; as a creature of another world to that in which he had been born and bred; as a child who must not be baulked of its playthings.

And she had fancied he was so happy! That was the bitterest pang of it all. Her fool's paradise had been such a lovely place, so full of exquisite sweet flowers, and the endless chant

of sweet-throated birds. She was turned out of it now, and a stern figure stood at the closed gates. It was like the old parable of Paradise Lost over again, only mistakes, not wrong-doing, had driven her forth, and Aunt Libbie with her knitting-pins took the place of the angel with the sword that turned both ways.

She had thought to fill John's life—to suffice him, not in one way, but in every way ; and here he was going against his own instincts, against his own advantage, lest she, his wife, should miss one of the luxuries she had been accustomed to.

Kate almost grew to hate her pretty home. Once, passing an artisan's cottage—one of a long, unlovely row—she saw a woman working at the open door, her foot on the rocker of a wooden cradle to keep it gently swinging, her head turned now and again to look down the dusty, shadeless road—the road, no doubt, her husband came toiling along homewards after his day's work is done.

"I wish I were like that woman," thought Kate, bitterly, "and John coming home to me up that road, with his basket of tools across his back. That would be 'like to like.' And there would be no Aunt Libbie to stab me to death with little stings—things that are well meant, but that hurt so badly. We would sit each at one side the round wooden table, John and I, and drink our tea ; I should have scrubbed it so white it would look like marble. There should not be a cinder on the hearth, and the bars of the grate should shine like ebony."

The "case" was on now, and John was more and more occupied with business. Often it was late at night before he got home.

Kate wearied for more of his society. To her something was ever lacking when he was not by her side. Where the sound of his voice was not, there was a silence that nothing could fill. She was not one, either, to find solace and content in the society of others, and, indeed, even old friends hardly pleased her nowadays, for Miss Libbie had, in some indirect way, given her to understand that she noticed John was silent.

and unsympathetic when in the society of the people Kate had been used to mix among. The old fire-eating General had cooled off in his attentions to Miss Libbie, some newer idol having ousted her from his versatile affections ; while the "freshness" of the eccentric old lady from Yorkshire had faded in the eyes of the artistic and Bohemian ladies, since the full glare of the season had dazzled them, and given them other things to think about.

These things being so, Miss Libbie saw fit to discover that all these people were "frivolous," and that John found them so, though his delicate consideration for Kate's feelings prevented him from saying so. Of course there was no truth in this view of the case, but there was some in the fact that John came home so tired at night that he did not care to go out to late receptions, or to have to entertain guests in his own house.

Kate had looked forward with longing to seeing Lady Whimperdale again. She had thought of the sound of the sweet voice, and the touch of the tender hand. Never had she stood more sorely in need of a good and true woman's friendship. Self-deceived and self-deceiving as she was, Kate at times realised that she had lost touch with reality ; that at the pressure of a kindly hand, at the sound of a loving voice, mists might clear away, and the sun shine out once more. Yet so it fell out that when most she stood in need of comfort she had to turn comforter.

Lord Whimperdale met with a serious accident. Thrown by a restive horse, he lay nigh at the point of death. His wife, tending him night and day, yet found time to scribble a line in pencil to young Mrs. Granger. The certainty of sympathy was in her heart as in Kate's, and it was comforting to call forth that sympathy in words.

It came full measure, pressed down, running over.

Kate put aside all her own sorrows, that grew suddenly dwarfed beside that greater sorrow, and poured out all her sympathy at her friend's feet.

We will not say that Miss Libbie rejoiced in that the lord of Whimperdale lay thus prostrate, his wife an anxious watcher by his side. We will not say that she gloated over Ray's letter, giving a rather disjointed but highly-coloured description of the accident, and of the interesting fact that Mr. Sweetapple and the brickdust-coloured pony happened to be passing at the time, and were both most useful in conveying the injured nobleman to Steadly ; also that Mrs. Sweetapple had been to tell them that "under Providence" the Rector and the pony had been the means of saving his lordship's life, and "he would in all probability be made a bishop as soon as a vacancy offered ;" Ray so wording the said letter, that it appeared as though the pony, and not the Rector, were destined to high ecclesiastical preferment.

It would be unjust to Miss Libbie to say she actually rejoiced in another's disaster.

But assuredly she was not ill-content that the house in Berkeley Square should still be tenantless, save for the ancient servitor and his wife, old retainers of the house of Whimperdale, who " minded it " when the family was not there for the season.

It is strange how often those we most long and crave for are " set far from us " in our hour of need.

Tunefully the sweet singer of Israel tells us that this was so with him—and his voice, stealing to us through the centuries, finds an echo in our own hearts.

The story of a Greater still than he tells us the same tale :

" If Thou hadst been here my brother had not died."

In after days to come Kate used to think to herself :

" If I had had anyone near me to speak faithfully to me things would have been different. My feet could never have strayed so far from the right way—never ! If I had seen Lady Whimperdale I should have opened my heart to her, and she would have set things right for me ; she would have *made the scales fall from my blinded eyes.*"

But she did not see Lady Whimperdale ; and, led by that

other, Kate went on preying on her own heart, drifting farther and farther from a full and perfect confidence with her husband, hiding the wound in her breast from his loving eyes, puzzled and bewildered by the problems of life that seemed so much too hard for her to unravel, longing at times for her dead to be given back to her—longing for the firm, guiding hand and protecting arm, for the chiding that had all the gift of healing, for the touch of a vanished hand and the sound of a voice that was still.

John, noticing a change in his wife, longing to learn if it were only his fancy, or if, in very truth, the sparkle and the laughter had died out of Bonnie Kate, and the sweet face grown older and graver than it should have been, asked Miss Libbie if she had noticed these things, and if she could assign any cause for them.

And Miss Libbie said : "Yes—oh yes ; Kate was looking a wee bit wangling ; women were like that at such times. It would all pass ; John had no need to worrit."

Then she added that, since Susie seemed to keep wonderfully well, and she herself "wasna' missed beyond bearin'" at the farm, it might be well she should "make shift" to stay with Kate until she was about again after her "trouble" was over.

Though this would entail the prolonged absence of Miss Libbie from her post at Low Cross Farm, John saw no more feasible plan. He had the confidence born of life-long habit in her powers of management, and her skill as a nurse. He was touched, too, by what he believed to be the surrender of past prejudices. After a little talk between the two that took place in his cosy study, he sat there full of thoughts that, as the saying goes, "came smiling."

"Even Aunt Libbie," he said to himself,—"even Aunt Libbie, who once talked of the day, most surely coming, in which he should repent his marriage ! Ah ! she knew better now. Kate had conquered. Bonnie Kate had won the day, . . . and who could wonder ?"

If Miss Libbie could have run up to Low Cross and made

sure that James Dodd was not behaving in an "unbecoming" manner ; if she could have assured herself that the bold, bad animal Pilcher was kept in his proper place ; if she could have learned beyond a doubt that red herrings were duly served at the family breakfast-table when eggs were fetching a high figure at the market town ; Miss Libbie would now have been supremely content. But it was useless, as she found, to question the twins on any of these domestic matters ; they took no notice at all of what she said, and filled their foolish pages with quite irrelevant matter. Humbie she dared not tackle, and she believed "brother" capable of ordering up a fresh dish of smoking rashers immediately on opening her letter.

She had, therefore, to make up her mind to let things drift in the North whither they would, resolving as a sort of set-off that when she returned to the Farm once more, herrings should be plentiful, rashers scarce, and James Dodd brought to a wondrous pitch of discipline, as well as the animal Pilcher. These comforting resolutions taken, Miss Libbie settled down to the even tenor of her way.

Writing to Humbie about this time she told him that nephew John's wife was "learning a bit of sense these days, and was not so full of fads and fancies as heretofore."

"Learning a bit of sense !" cried Humbie aloud, in the solitude of the perfumed larch wood whither he had fled ; "and are you breaking your dear heart over the lesson, I wonder, Kate—Bonnie Kate ?"

Jack, hearing his master thus addressing space, looked round to see if anyone were near, sniffing the air with his sensitive nose, as who should say : "There is actually no living creature near save a foolish squirrel in the fork of that larch tree, sitting with his tail over his back, and I'm sure my master can't mean all those fine words for him ; so they must be addressed to me."

He went to his master's side, laid his head upon his knee, and looked up wistfully into his face.

"*Jack, dear old boy, how you loved her ! You were like*

her shadow, weren't you? I wish you and I were near her now!"

Jack thought it was mighty pleasant sitting out there in the dappled sunshine that filtered through the larch boughs, with his master taking so much notice of him, and taking no notice of anyone else, which was the cream of the joy, after all; but with a dog's unerring sagacity he saw that the face bending over him was grave and sad. His tawny breast swelled with a sigh; he gently licked the hand of the master whose moods were ever reflected in his own.

The summer day was paling, Kate's pretty morning-room was growing shadowy in the corners, and Miss Libbie was just coming to the conclusion that she could not knit any longer without fear of injuring her eyesight, when there was a stir in the hall, and Kate started to her feet.

"It is John," she said; "after all he has come home early; he said he should be late to-night."

"Men are apt not to know their own minds," said Miss Libbie, sourly, with a toss of the head.

But the man who now stood at the open door knew his mind well enough, and it was not John at all. It was a tall fair-haired, blue-eyed young fellow, whose eager looks were bent on Kate, whose voice shook and trembled as he uttered her name.

"Kate, Kate, my darling Kate!"

With a glad cry she was in his arms, her hands knotted about his neck.

"Will!" she cried; "oh, Will, Will! have you come back to me?"

Then as her lips touched his cheek, she fell a-weeping.

Miss Libbie, who had been regarding the intruder with a stony stare, now rose to the occasion—or what she believed to be the occasion—

"I'm not one," she said, "to stay by and see nephew John's wife make free with any one that way."

CHAPTER XVIII.

MISS LIBBIE IS CALLED A "PERSON."

IT would be difficult to say whether Kate heard Miss Libbie's words, or grasped their full offensiveness.

Though the tears were streaming from her eyes, she was gazing with a strained, piteous look across Will's shoulder.

Strange hallucinations come over all of us at such moments ; the association of ideas is so strong that it carries all before it, and thoughts arise within us that partake strangely of the madman's fantasies.

If Kate had seen a tall, gaunt, soldierly figure following on in Will's wake, if the light of the kindly eyes that had shone upon her from her childhood had shone upon her once again, she would scarce have known amaze.

Will's coming, sudden, unlooked for, had thrilled to her heart ; but that coming was incomplete.

For the moment she was ready to forget the gap that death had made, the snapped link in the golden chain of the old home memories.

The troubles of these latter days, Miss Libbie's spites and littlenesses, all these things seemed to have passed away into the immeasurable distance of space ; they had no power to touch her. She and Will stood there, close to each other, separated from all the world. The arms that held her were those of the old, old home by the river. In a sort of dazed, confused manner Kate at last looked round at Miss Libbie. *To another world from that to which her mind had wandered*

belonged that angular figure, those stern, accusing, shadowless eyes. She passed her hand across her brow, as though to sweep away the cobwebs that puzzled her mind.

"This is my cousin Will," she said, taking a step aside from him, and looking up proudly into his fair, manly face.

Then the rush of memory and bitter regret came over her again, even as a flood of deep waters. She clung to his arm, and her head fell back against his shoulder.

"Oh, Will, Will—it seemed so hard that he should die so far away, and I not by him!"

But Will stared stonily over that prone head at Miss Libbie, and with an irresistible impulse laid his hand, as if in protection, upon the ruddy-brown locks that lay against his breast.

"Poor Kate!" he said; "I have come upon you too suddenly. I ought not to have taken you by surprise like this; but I did not know—I could not tell; I had no idea it would upset you like this."

All this while Will had never ceased to glare at Miss Libbie, his honest blue eyes on fire with hottest indignation, though his words were addressed to Kate.

"Kate, you are changed—your voice, your face. Why, you look years older. What have they been doing to you? I doubt if Aunt Cynthia would know you; and how you tremble! Sit down, dear, and I will sit beside you, and I will tell you how it is that I have dropped from the clouds."

Miss Libbie's presence was intolerable to him, and it seemed to him best to ignore her.

How dared she speak as she had done to his cousin Kate—and who on earth did she mean by "Nephew John?"

"I ran in to take a peep at the dear old place," went on Will, "and I really thought Dulcimer was going to hug me outright—I did, indeed: and as to Chloe—just fancy—there she was in a basket with a blanket in it, and four tiny, round black puppy-heads bobbing up and down! When she saw me she sprang out like a mad thing, and upset them all.

How Dulcimer laughed. Kate, Kate ! what are you doing ?
Laughing and crying both in a breath ! ”

By this time it had fully dawned upon Miss Libbie that she had spoken unadvisedly with her tongue ; but the ardour of the chase was upon her. She had long ago given herself a mental impetus in the direction of running down “ nephew John’s wife,” and that impetus had grown stronger than herself.

Now she had spoken without sufficient thought ; but such as her colours were—poor pitiful rags of jealousy and spite—she would nail them to the mast.

“ Young women were more mannerly—more becomingly behaved when I was a girl,” she said, bridling as though the indiscreet advances of half the male sex had been at various times nipped in the bud by her virginal dignity and decorum.

“ Who is this person,” cried downright Will, springing to his feet, and running his fingers wildly through his sun-bright hair—“ this person who insults you openly in your own house —who is she, Kate ? ”

Kate, hitherto dreamily unconscious of Miss Libbie, absorbed as she had been in thoughts and associations with which that virtuous female could in no wise, even ever so remotely, be connected, rose, went to his side, and laid her hand upon his arm.

She knew Will of old in these high moods of his, and knew that he was dangerous.

“ That is Aunt Libbie,” she began, and was going on, but the headstrong boy gave her no chance.

“ An old servant of the Granger family, I suppose, given brevet rank from long service. They generally get called Aunt Somebody or other before they die, I believe, and I’m ready to make all allowances, I’m sure ; but really, Kate, you must allow me to say this one is about as impudent as they make them. How dare she speak like she did just now ? Why don’t you order her out of the room ? ”

For the nonce indignation had deprived Miss Libbie of the

powers of utterance. She shivered like an aspen-leaf, or as though some unkindly hand were letting cold water trickle slowly but surely down her back. She had been called a "person." There was but one lower degradation possible. The upstart young man with the aggressively curly hair and glaring eyes might have called her a "woman." That would have been worse still, but any way things were quite bad enough.

"Person yersel'," cried Miss Libbie, when speech was possible, "I'd have you to know, young man, I'm no person at all, nor no one's servant neither; and as for imperence, if one on us had ought to quit on that score, it's yo', my young cockerel. 'Them as crow too young come to no good.' That's the sayin' on our farm, and Ebenezer wrings t' necks o' such, and they set off head downwards to t' market town, an' never a crow left in 'em. I'd have yo' to know as I'm own sister to Thomas Granger o' Low Cross Farm, and own Aunt to young John as owns this house and all as is in it. We'er plain soart o' folk, an' happen audfarrant i' our notions, and loike to see them as is kith and kin to us behave becomin' in that state of life whatever it may be. We know nowt o' the free ways o' some sort o' folks, and I'm not of a moind to think as our John 'ull cotton to sich ways. You're worse nor James Dodd, wi' Pilcher tossed into t' bargain, so yo' be."

"Audfarrant, imperence, makin' free——Kate, Kate, what is this?"

Will grasped his cousin's arm like a vice. His face was pale; his lips shook under the shade of the golden-hued moustache that had grown so thick since last Kate saw him, and given such a new manliness to him.

"Is it true?" he cried; "can it be——"

But Kate had her hand on his mouth.

"Not now," she pleaded, speaking in a sort of frenzy; "not now, for my sake! Will, Will, she does not mean it, she does not know!"

But Miss Libbie would be neither excused nor repressed.

She stalked like a stage-ghost to the door, and there delivered herself of what she considered a suitable valediction.

"Yes, she does mean it; she's a plain kind o' body is Thomas Granger's sister, and she begs to say as yo're an ill-mannered, ill-conditioned young fellow whoever yo' be, and mak' a sight too free wi' John's wife and John's house; an' yo're like t' rest on 'em, ready to trample on honest folk, because they conna' speak same as if they'd a plum i' their mouths; an' I wish yo' a very good evenin', and yo've hearn the truth for once in your life if yo' never did before."

Then there was a clap-to of the door, and Miss Libbie was gone.

Kate fell back upon the couch, lifting her hands to her brow, where the chill sweat was beading. Her thoughts were a torment to herself. She saw what sailors call "breakers ahead," and knew not how to breast them.

They say that in all women's love there is a tinge of motherhood—a longing to comfort and protect; a spice of the tender cunning that teaches the lark, whose nest is near, to flutter, as if wounded, across the furrows, and lead the unsuspecting intruder upon a false scent. This mother-instinct was now strong in Kate. She longed to clasp the arms of her love about the husband she adored, and save him from the blame that was his just due.

She parleyed with her own heart as to the possibility of denial. She longed for some subtle way in which to throw dust into poor Will's clear, compelling eyes. A woman will sacrifice anything and anybody, even while pitying them as they mount the death-pyre, for a man she passionately loves; and Kate was rather ahead of than behind the rest of her sex in such capabilities of blind passion and devotion.

But in this case she saw no way, straight or crooked, out of a difficulty. Gladly enough would she have shifted the burden of disingenuousness from John's shoulder to her own. Gladly would she have said: "The fault lies with me.

I know—I kept back the truth from you, from Aunt Cynthia, from the dear one we have lost, because I feared you would stand between me and the man I loved." But Kate knew that this path was one that would lead nowhere.

From her childhood she had been too open, too confiding, for those belonging to her to credit the donning of such a cloak as that. The happy, "scrappy" home by the river had been one in which were no lurking-places, no closed doors, no bolts or bars. The light of day, of love, of perfect confidence, shone into every cranny and corner of their hearts and lives.

Kate had speculated as to "John's people"; wondered at none of them coming to the marriage, saucily suggesting that they were jealous of her. John had pleaded his mother's ill-health: and a letter from Humbie, wishing the affianced pair every happiness, carried out the same idea.

No, no, *no!* there was no way out of the coil that was about her through such a conceit as that.

It had taken more time to write down these thoughts than they took to flash through Kate's mind. Meanwhile Will stood staring at the door through which Miss Libbie had vanished from his amazed eyes. He felt like one who walks in sleep, and sees visions of things unreal. All was so new, so strange, so unexpected.

It was hard, indeed, to realise Kate, their Bonnie Kate, Uncle Anthony's darling, the apple of Aunt Cynthia's eye, amid such surroundings, exposed to such coarse misconstruction and vituperation!

"Kate," he said at last, turning sharply on her, "Kate, what is all this? What does it mean? Who is this intolerable woman who claims to be one of your husband's people?"

Then he was silent a moment, while the hot blood rushed to his face, dyeing his brow crimson even to the roots of his crisp, bright curls. A new thought had struck William Dennis Pierrepont.

"Can it be—Kate, forgive me if I hurt you, dear—but—tell

me, did John Granger steal you from us under false pretences?"

He drew his breath heavily, bending over her, his eye searching hers.

She held out her poor, trembling hands towards him, as in their happy childhood she had been wont to do when anything hurt or frightened "little Kate"; the tears burst from her drowned eyes, her voice was broken by short, gasping sobs.

"It was because he loved me so dear—because he loved me so dear. . . ."

She could think of no better shield, no better defence for her dear one, than the words his mother's lips had uttered.

"Loved you so dear!" echoed Will, clasping the cold hands in his; "those are not your own words, Kate; why do you speak in such fashion as that?"

"Because the words are good and true, and to me their sound is sweet. He loved me, and feared to lose me—not that he would have done so. If I had known all the truth, and more, I should still have stood by John's side against all the world—against you—against Aunt Cynthia," then, in a hushed, awed whisper—"against Uncle Anthony."

"And you love him like that?"

"I love him like that. There is no music in life for me when the sound of his voice is not. If I were set far away where the touch of his hand could not reach me, I should feel like one banished to some waste and desolate place, where no flower could blossom, and no bird sing."

"Thank God that this great love is yours," said Will, his voice all a-quiver as he spoke; "you must have needed it all—poor Kate! poor Kate! to face what you had to face."

She was on her feet in a moment, the tears dried in the blaze that lit up her great sad eyes; her hands pressed against her breast that heaved as the billow heaves in the breath of the storm.

"Hush!" she said; "never speak to me like that. I have laid my heart bare to you that you may feel chained to silence

for ever. The wrong was mine as well as his. I thought only of myself, and now with all my love I cannot content him. He sees faults in me that he is too tender to tell me of. I have ways, and fads, and fancies that are alien to him. I am trying to discipline myself—trying to be more like him day by day ; and by God's help I shall succeed at last. I shall learn to set less store by little fancies ; I shall be quite a different Kate one of these days, you will see."

Will's face was covered with his hands. Of all the fancy pictures he had drawn of Kate in her new home, this was the last, the most unlikely.

He seemed to go on from one amazement to another, each greater than the last. Truly in this tearful, passion-shaken, earnest-hearted woman it was difficult to recognise that Bonnie Kate who had been the sunshine of the old home, the merry companion of his boyish escapades, the girl with a solemn wonder in her eyes, plighting her troth to John in the church by the river.

Yet even now Will called to mind words spoken by one whom love, and the near approach of the world unseen and spiritual, made keen to read the hearts of those about him.

"She will always take life hard, will Kate—always suffer more keenly than others. John Granger has undertaken a great responsibility, for Kate will be hard to live up to—hard to guard from her own nature."

Dear Uncle Anthony—how well he knew his darling off by heart !

Bonnie Kate was "taking life hard," indeed, now.
"I sometimes feel," she said, pulling Will's hand down gently, and wiping away a tear that glistened on his cheek ; "I sometimes feel as if he is quite near me and sees it all, and knows—oh, ever so much better than I could tell him—all about it. He knew my faults so well—how wild, impulsive, and undisciplined I was. Well, life is teaching me something, Will, I think—making me a little less wilful, more staid and thoughtful, than I used to be, and what I think is this, as long as John isn't sorry——"

"Sorry!" cried Will, indignant.

"Yes," her great eyes looking up at him like those of a troubled child, "sorry that he married me. As long as he does not mind me having been brought up in such different ways, having such different ideas, I can feel content enough in my own way."

Of what good to reason with her? Will could only make her sit down beside him, hold her hand in his, and stroke it gently, as one might that of a child one wanted to help to bear an inevitable pain. She seemed to have gone very far away from her old play-fellow into a world whither he could not follow, this Kate, who had once been so "bonnie," but now scarce deserved the name love-given in the olden days.

"You understand?" she said, a fever-spot burning on each fair cheek; "you will never say a word to me against my husband; you will never let anyone else do so? You will be the same good, kind Will you used to be, helping me out of all my scrapes. Oh, Will!" breaking off with a little pitiful laugh, "do you remember the day I fell into the duck-weed pond, and you wrapped me up in Aunt Cynthia's cloak, and smuggled me in through the back door, and there was Dulcimer waiting for me. How she held *up* her hands and blessed herself when she undid the cloak and saw me there all dripping wet, and green from head to foot!"

She was laughing now; and her laugh sounded to Will sadder than her weeping, it was such a ghost of the old, merry, silver laughter of the past.

"I will never say a word against your husband to you, Kate," he said, drawing her gently to him; "never, and I will not let anyone else do so if I can help it, dear. But oh, how you must have suffered—you, our princess, our queen—to find yourself among such people. Oh, Kate! Kate!"

"They were not what you mean," she cried, frantic at feeling how useless it was to try and make him understand; "they were lovely, beautiful, in their own way—different to us, of course; but I grew to love them—oh! indeed I did—

and I learnt so much from them, you cannot think how much. Even Aunt Libbie (she was very rude to you, Will, and I am sorry) has her good points."

"I'm glad of it," growled Will. "I didn't see them."

"No; no one would until they knew her well. Even then she hurts one often and often, but I think Aunt Libbie is good for one in a sort of way."

"It's not my way."

"She did not mean half she said; she did not know, she did not understand. She would not have been like that if she had known."

"I'm glad of that."

And then—Kate hardly knew how—she found herself launched into the midst of the family history of the Grangers of Low Cross Farm. She could tell a story graphically enough, could Kate, and soon Will declared himself consumed with longing to see the twins, to hear Humbie play the violin, to make Jack's acquaintance, and to "have a tussle with Mrs. Sweetapple."

He grew interested in Lord Whimperdale, as an old friend of the General's, and in his lady-wife, as having shown a proper appreciation of Kate. As to Melissa—well, her photograph, given to Kate as a parting present, spoke more than words, and Will roundly declared he should certainly visit the village of Low Cross one of these days, go for a drive behind the fiery Bucephalus, and hear the new harmonium with the "dither" well turned on.

Kate painted all that Miss Libbie had done for the family in glowing colours, put in the patient, suffering mother with tender, delicate touches, and Will warmed to the last picture, but was adamant to the first. Neither did he respond to his cousin's assurances of how useful and kind "in her own way" Miss Libbie had been since her advent in London.

When the lamps were brought in Will began to think Kate looked more like herself, and the cousins talking of this thing and that, passing from Low Cross Farm to Madeira, and all

that had happened there, and on to Will's own prospects as a young Attaché to be, forgot the angered and forlorn woman in the room above stairs, and the hard words and rasping tongue of an hour before.

"John will be late to-night," said Kate, as the clock on the mantel chimed out eight.

And then she knew that the bitterness of death was not past ; that though her blithe and bonnie Will had come back to her again, he and John could not meet as in the happy days beside the river.

She saw Will's face change ; she saw the sudden proud uplifting of the shapely head ; the set of the proud, clear-cut mouth.

"I cannot stay now," he said, gripping her hand with painful tightness, "there is so much to see to ; but to-morrow, Kate—to-morrow I will snatch an hour to come and see you. Have you forgiven me for my sudden coming without warning ? I shall never make surprises for anyone again ; they are not good things. Aunt Cynthia was against it from the first, but I would have my own way. You know what a wilful lad I was always, don't you, dear ? "

It was quite true what Will said about having a great deal to see to. He had received his summons ; he must report himself at head-quarters. A vacancy on some Foreign Embassy seemed probable, and he might be called upon to fill it. He had hurried to England, leaving Aunt Cynthia to follow with some friends. Even now Mrs. Dulcimer was instituting a marvellous "upsetting," as the housemaids had it, and Chloe had been shuffled, little black-headed puppies and all, into a dark cupboard, to be out of the way to make ready for the coming of the mistress.

It was quite true that Will must be a very busy person indeed for the next few days to come.

But for all that Kate was not deceived. He would not stay ; he did not want to meet John.

With an indescribable pang she realised that it was best

so—that a meeting must be a painful ordeal—more especially with Miss Libbie at hand to make things as much worse as possible by every word she uttered.

Kate even shrank from the thought of telling John that Will had been, and had encountered “Thomas Granger’s own sister,” and been mauled by her.

It was a dreadful tangle, look at it which way you would.

All the laughter died out of Kate’s eyes ; the old Kate that had come back for a while was once more lost in the sad-eyed, weary-faced woman of the Kensington home ; and Will, as he kissed her good-bye, though it was but till the morrow, felt a lump rise in his throat, and a mist gather before his eyes.

He had been interested in her story of the farm and its home-circle ; she had dowered it all in the telling with a glamour not its own ; but now, out in the balmy summer night, with the lingering light of the sunset sky falling like a coloured veil over the world of fair suburban London, he realised the full bitterness of it all.

His heart was hot within him as he thought of pretty Kate, so daintily fair, so delicately nurtured, amid such surroundings.

“It was a fine thing she had a good friend or two about her anyway,” he muttered, as he threw himself back in the corner of the Richmond train ; “that girl—Melissa, wasn’t it ?—yes, Melissa—must be a good sort ; and ” (suddenly recalling the bright *spirituelle* face that Kate had shown him) “what a fine pair of eyes she has in her head, and what a pretty turn of the neck ? I should like to hear her play that harmonium—ay, and see her drive the brickdust-coloured pony. What’s the good of a girl if she hasn’t plenty of ‘go’ in her ?”

It was a relief to him, for the time being, to put aside all thought of his cousin Kate. She was a problem that would have to be faced and thought out some day.

Yes ? but not as Will imagined. The future had more amazement in store for him, than even the past had brought.

CHAPTER XIX.

"YOU DO NOT KNOW—YOU CANNOT TELL."

IF things had been different, if there had been no hitch anywhere, Kate would have told her husband on his return that night, with joyous gladness, that her cousin Will was again in England, and had been to see her. As it was, there was, naturally enough, restraint between them on the subject. The deepest sympathies of Kate's nature had been stirred and troubled by the sight of one so closely interwoven with the memories of youth and home ; her sense of loss in the death of her Uncle Anthony had been quickened and intensified. There were all the signs of mental disturbance about her. Dark rings beneath her eyes made them look unnaturally large and bright ; her face was wan and pale. Thoughts and fears were battling in her heart of which she could not speak to John ; and he, in a dim uncertain way, was conscious of this. He shrank from asking Kate if Will—that bright, outspoken boy—had met Aunt Libbie ; for that seemed a question which might lead up to matters best left alone. He writhed in spirit as he speculated upon what might have happened ; for he knew Aunt Libbie off by heart, and was sure that if she saw any sign of surprise in young Pierrepont's greeting, she would, so to speak, shake and rattle all her peculiarities in his face, and stick at nothing in the matter of giving tongue to the wrath within her.

Kate told her husband how much Will had changed in the months that he had been away ; how the marks of all he had lived through were plainly to be seen upon him ; how tall, and

straight, and manly he looked in his deep mourning ; how the boy was lost in the man, and what a help and comfort he must have been to Aunt Cynthia in those dreadful days of sorrow, when the shadow of death was over all. She told him of that strange delusive feeling that made her stare over Will's shoulder, expecting, or almost expecting, to see the dead follow in the wake of the living ; and John understood it all, holding her close, and trying to kiss the sadness from her eyes, and the tremble from her lips.

Yet in both their hearts—otherwise thus closely linked together—was a beating pulse of pain. Kate had to face the thought of Aunt Cynthia's coming ; John to lose himself in wondering how Aunt Libbie had been accounted for to Will, if the two, so lamentably ill-suited to each other, had chanced to meet.

John had dined at his club, the two women alone at home, so there was no formal foregathering during the rest of the evening. During the short time the three were together Miss Libbie kept an unusual silence ; she listened so intently that it was a wonder her ears did not stand out on either side her head like a watchful spaniel's. Her neck was somewhat stiffer than usual, and her eyes assiduously cast down upon the book which she was supposed to be attentively perusing ; but she lost not a word of what passed between the husband and wife. John, watching her stealthily, made sure she had seen Will and said everything she had best have left unsaid, though his wildest dreams could never have given him even an inkling of the dreadful truth. It was pretty clear by this time that Kate would not do so. Miss Libbie felt secure enough on that head ; yet as she listened to Kate talking of her cousin's home-coming, and of the old days at Richmond, a feeling stole over her that she had over-stepped the bounds of prudence, or, as she put it to herself, "been o'er hasty i' lettin' her tongue go agate."

If anything had come up about it she would even have been ready to tell "nephew John" that it was possible she

had erred ; but she would not have made such an admission to or before Kate.

John noticed, with a sinking at the heart, that Miss Libbie held aloof, and never once joined in the conversation as to Will's sudden appearance.

This, combined with Kate's silence as to the older woman having had part or lot in the meeting led John to the belief that things had gone badly with poor Will, and that Kate had suffered.

Oh, the sadness of it all when hearts are troubled and tongues are tied ; when the healing flow of perfect confidence and unreserve is checked and driven back upon itself !

That night, the while John Granger slept the heavy sleep of the tired brain-worker, Kate lay wide-eyed, keeping a weary vigil, striving to unravel the puzzle of life, as it appeared before her troubled eyes.

It was intolerable that John should be under a cloud with those dearest to her. And yet—how avert it ?

Darkness is a cruel magnifier ; the silence of night around us makes the voice of troubled thought ring more loudly in our ears.

Glad indeed was Kate when the faint amethyst light of the cloudless summer morn began to filter through the dropped blinds, and now and again a sparrow chirped and twittered amid the leaves of the Virginia-creeper.

By that time she had come to a certain resolve. It was the result of much thought, of many questionings and searchings of heart. Kate felt comforted, in that it seemed to her she was about to take a wise and well-considered step ; and when John took leave of her that morning to go to his chambers he thought that, in spite of whatever *contretemps* might have occurred, Will's coming had done her good.

She stood at the window, kissing her hand to him as he went down the road. He carried the fair memory of that pretty greeting with him in his heart all day, was glad, too, to think she would see Will again ; and had suggested that they

should pay a visit together to Mrs. Dulcimer, Chloe, and the black-faced puppies.

It would be sad, John thought, to Kate and Will to visit the old home together, and everywhere miss the music of the presence and the voice that had made it all so sweet ; but in that sadness would lie the gift of healing for his darling, since perfect sympathy would be hers, and thought would leap to wed with thought, and tears be dried by a loving hand.

All that day John was happier than he had been for some time past. He was glad to think Kate would have some of her own kith and kin near to her once more—glad even in spite of the battle that might lie before him, because of the wrong done that could never be fully undone.

Meanwhile Kate watched and waited her opportunity to carry out the resolve begotten by a night of thought and vigil.

She was going to make an appeal to the enemy. In other words, she had determined to plead for fair and kindly dealing at the hands of Miss Libbie.

The better to carry out this notion, Kate sought the adversary in her own stronghold.

She waited until all household matters were done with ; then, secure from interruption, betook herself to the comfortable room that her own fingers had bedecked and beautified to welcome the first guest in her own home, the first stranger to sojourn under her own roof.

Perhaps, when in answer to Miss Libbie's bidding Kate went slowly in, closed the door after her, and sat down on the low ottoman in the daintily-draped window, there was something in her steadfast eyes and in the set of her mouth that roused misgivings. At all events Miss Libbie drew a long breath, laid down the "granny" bonnet she was carefully retrimming with a craftily-turned ribbon, and folded her hands. Miss Libbie was too active a woman to fold her hands often.

When she did so it "meant business"; that is, it showed that she realised the fact of some domestic crisis being at hand.

"I came to speak to you, Aunt Libbie," said Kate quietly, "about something that is troubling me very much. I feel sure you will like me to speak out straight to you of what lies in my heart?"

To this half question Miss Libbie replied by screwing up her mouth, putting her head on one side, and making believe to look in a thoroughly searching manner at the turned ribbon as seen in the cruel light of the summer sunshine.

"Please listen to what I say," went on Kate; "it means a great deal to me, Aunt Libbie—a sorry, sorry deal."

"I'm listening," said Libbie, ungraciously; "say your say."

"Well, my say is this. I want you to try and make things less hard for me—you can if you like."

"I'm not one to be put upon, nor yet trampled on, nor yet one to let folk scrape their feet on me, and look down on me."

Miss Libbie was very upright, and the muscles in her neck stood out clear and hard.

"Look down on you! Who has ever done that?"

"That young popinjay," began Miss Libbie, tossing her head; but Kate would not let her go on.

"My cousin Will, do you mean? He did not look down upon you, Aunt Libbie; you were very, very cruel to him, and—to me. You forced him to speak as he did."

"I'm not one to take up wi' such free ways and manners."

But Kate would not tolerate this for a moment.

"There were no free ways and manners in the case, Aunt Libbie, *and you know it*," she said, clasping her hands round her knees and leaning eagerly forward, while the blood flew hot to her temples; "Will is my dear younger brother, *the companion* of all my life. If John knew that you . . ."

"John's a fool!"

"Please to remember it is my husband you are speaking of," said Kate, proudly.

"Oh, I'm no' like to forget it. We havena' had such bonnie days since you and he were wed, that there's any like I'll forget it."

"Don't say that, Aunt Libbie; say anything but that," cried poor Kate. "I tried so hard. I thought you all liked me, indeed I did."

"Yo' tried so hard," replied the other mockingly. "Happen yo' did. Yo' tried to bring yersel' to the level of us; yo' tried to hide away from us how yo' scorned the lot on us; and happen yo' blinded some on 'em, but not me—not me! I've had a pair of eyes i' my head all my life, I have, an' I can see further than most."

"If you felt like this, if you thought like this, why did you come here—why did you come into my home, to make it sad for me? Why did you come under a pretence of kindness? Why have you dealt with me so cruelly? I know I used to fancy you disliked me, Aunt Libbie, but I hoped all that was past and gone. If I offended you when I was at Low Cross I am sorry. I know I was strange—I did not understand."

"A fine lady was like enoo' to be strange among plain folk like us; like enoo' not to understand our ways and our manners; like enoo' to look down upon us, and be glad to get away from us to my Lady Whimperdale's."

"I was not—I was not," said Kate, bewildered at the turn affairs were taking, for she had never before grasped the state of Miss Libbie's mind towards her; "I loved Lady Whimperdale because she was kind and good to me; because her husband knew my dear, dear Uncle Anthony—for any reason except such motives as the paltry ones you seem to have imputed to me; but even if I did feel strange at first, why should you visit it on me now? Why should you make things so miserable for me with my own people? My Aunt

Cynthia is coming home soon. Will you make things as miserable for me with her as you did with my cousin Will? She is old and feeble,—she is borne down by grief. What shall I do if you make her sad?"

"She's another to trample on us and look down on us—eh?" said Miss Libbie, with startling energy and spite—"another to despise John Granger an' the plain folk he comes of—eh?"

"Aunt Libbie, if you feel like this, why did you come here? What have I done to you that you should speak to me like this? Have I not made you welcome? Have I not shown you by word and deed how tenderly I bear in mind all you have been in the past to John and to all of them?"

"They're much beholden to you, I'm sure, for strivin' to pay their debts for them, Mrs. John," replied Miss Libbie, who was fast working herself up into a kind of frenzy; "but Yorkshire folk can look to their own duds, as the sayin' goes, as well as ony folk I know; and as to why I came here, I came to see London town afore I die; and I came to see how nephew John was done by, by them as looks down on him, and belittles him."

"Aunt Libbie! Aunt Libbie!"

From the sound of Kate's voice a listener might well have thought that actual blows were being dealt by Miss Libbie's active arm; and blows, indeed, were falling thick, but it was upon the heart, not the head, that they fell.

But Miss Libbie was like a horse that has taken the bit between its teeth and bolted down hill. It would be difficult for the animal to stop in its mad career even if it had the will.

"How came these fine folk o' yourn, that conna' bear to be put out, and are so mighty, nesh forenenst a hard word or a crooked look, to let yo' wed wi' our John, a plain farmer's son, as ought to ha' coupled wi' his own kind?"

Kate was silent. For one thing, wounded pride held her so; for another, the old wound broke out afresh and bled.

She would have stood by John through all, and yet—and yet—

Miss Libbie little knew the soreness of the wound she touched with harsh, unconscious fingers.

"No one looks down on John—no one *dare!*" said Kate at last, setting her small, white teeth hard after the utterance of the last word.

Miss Libbie's small, shrewd grey eyes twinkled with cunning.

"Not that young sprig, that cousin o' yours? Why then didna' he stay to see him? Was it showin' much politeness to come like that, and take himself off before nephew John came home? Don't tell me, Mistress John; I'm not one to be fooled like that. The lad's coming again to-day, is not he? Well, yo'll see; he'll come, and he'll go; but he'll shape things so he won't meet our John."

It was true—true—true—but not as Miss Libbie thought.

The coil seemed tightening, the tangle thickening, about Bonnie Kate. The more she struggled, the closer was she clipped and tied down by the meshes that were none of her own weaving.

She would have given worlds to give Miss Libbie the lie. But how to do so?

While she sat there gazing out fixedly at the lovely sunny day that seemed to mock her with its beauty, the worst blow of all fell crashing on her drooping head.

"It's ower true, after all, what John said a while back—oyer true—oyer true; and now there's no way out on't."

Kate was on her feet in a moment: she stood before Miss Libbie with star-bright eyes and panting breast, like an avenging spirit.

"What did John say?"

Miss Libbie had never yet heard the voice in which Kate Granger put that question. The Yorkshirewoman was no coward, but yet she became conscious of a chilliness about the spine, and her hands shook as she gripped them one in the other.

"It wasna' much," she said, hesitating.

But Kate's look and voice were imperative. Miss Libbie felt that no retreat was possible.

"He did bo' say as the time might come, if only he waited long enoo', when he'd be sorry he'd wed wi' them as wur like to look down on him and his'n."

There was a silence so heavy, so complete, so oppressive, that the plaintive cheep of a bird outside seemed to rend and tear it as might a human cry.

Miss Libbie could not see move or stir in the still figure seated in the full radiance of the sunlight. She was conscious of a mad impulse to scream.

What had she done?

So thoroughly carried away by the heat and passion of the moment was Miss Libbie that she was actually unconscious of the untruth of the words she had uttered; she had, for the time being, absolutely forgotten that the words made use of were simply her own—that the assent silence is said to give was all of truth she had to go upon.

Nay, she had thought of, and dwelt upon, that passage of arms between herself and John in the old house-place at home so long, and distorted everything about it so persistently in her own mind, that we may doubt whether she would have been even under cooler circumstances than the present fully aware of how falsely she was dealing with John's wife.

Anyway, Miss Libbie wished Kate would speak. She felt like a person who, expecting to see a ghost, longs for the apparition to hurry itself, and so get the worst over.

In reality, Kate was only silent about three minutes, but it appeared to Miss Libbie at least half an hour.

She could only remember having felt quite so uncomfortable once in her life before, and that was when the doctors held a consultation as to whether poor Susie would ever again be "like other folk," and she and "brother" waited in the *house-place* for the verdict. The worst of it was that on

the present occasion Miss Libbie felt absolutely incapable of breaking the awful silence herself.

She would have given worlds to do so, but there was a plum in her throat, and her lips were stiff and clung together.

At last it came ; the sounds of words dropped heavily one by one, as one might drop stones into a pool.

“John—said—that—”

The spell was broken.

Miss Libbie took a deep breath, and, so to say, gathered herself together. No one ever knew how near, in that moment of suspense, she had been to throwing herself on her knees before her nephew John’s wife, and calling herself a black-hearted, sinful old woman. It made her gasp to think of such a danger so narrowly escaped.

Once more came the slow, dropping words, varied, however, this time ; “John—my husband—said that—” .

“There was no other John at Low Cross that I know of,” said Miss Libbie, flippant from a sort of hysterical sense of relief, and yet with a strange feeling of dismay gathering about her heart. “There was a man named John on the farm a while afore. He come to teach Matthew a fancy kind o’ bedding out. He wur a bit simple, and caught t’ measles at forty-nine. He allers went about wi’ his mouth open, and were like enoo’ to catch any mortal thing.”

“Aunt Libbie,” put in that dreadful, dragging voice again, the while Aunt Libbie’s very soul seemed to shrivel up within her, as might the body of some wretched hedgehog roasted in a gipsy’s fire, within his coat of bristles, “Aunt Libbie, perhaps you do not know how your words sound in my ears. You never had—a husband. You do not know—you cannot tell—how all one’s world centres in him and in his love ; how his unkindness cannot be cancelled, even ever so little, by the kindness of all the world beside—no one, however good, however dear, can make up—for—him. But I forget ; you never had a husband ; you do not know what you have done.”

"Well, n—o," said Miss Libbie, screwing her mouth on one side, and touching and settling the cameo brooch upon her bosom with a coquettish air. "I have never been married ; an' it's all on a piece with what I'd ought to expect and look for under this roof to have it thrown at me like this. Anyhow, I might have been married if I'd wished, same as the rest of the world. All Low Cross knew that Farmer M'Cullam—once I'd said at Fairley Harvest Home I favoured green by way of a colour—came to church the very next Sunday in a tie like the grass. Yes, indeed in truth did he—green wi' a satin sheen on it too, the elegantest thing ever I saw, and when I saw him standing there wi' the plate in his hand, smiling, as much as to say he wore green for me, I got all of a flutter, and dropped the penny from my glove onto the floor, instead of the plate, an' it roll't and roll't all among the tombstones too, for the porch floor's sunk, an' all aslant even to this very day wi' age and damp an' one thing or another, and Maister Ferney's boy had a fine time lookin' for't. I can tell yo' I wur as red the while as one o' brother's picklin' cabbages he's so proud on, that wur I."

Thus did Miss Libbie wander on in a maze of her own reminiscences, trying to seek refuge in a mist of her own creating.

But only a pace away a human heart was breaking—a human heart was battling with doubt, and fear, and wild amaze ; a woman, terribly in earnest, was trying to face what to her exalted and perturbed spirit seemed as the very bitterness of death itself—the death of hope, and trust, and love, and happiness.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PETALS OF A ROSE.

"MASTER WILL! Master Will! please here's Miss Catherine. I beg pardon humbly—I should say Mrs. Granger."

Mrs. Dulcimer was not a little excited. As to Chloe, she was twisting herself into every conceivable unnatural form, and grovelling at Kate's feet, partly to bid her welcome to Ellersleigh, partly to mention the fact that a basketful of the most delightful puppies in the world were to be found by the fire in the housekeeper's room. The little animal, in her joyous excitement, even went so far as to take delicate hold of a bit of Mrs. Granger's dress, and tug at it softly, as who should say : "Do come and see these pretty ones of mine ; don't stay talking to old Dulcimer or Master Will, but come and make a good use of your time—do!" Will came down the wide stairway two steps at a time, leaping the last five or so. His hair was all rumpled into a mass of bright ripples, and his hands—well, they were certainly the very reverse of clean, and the better displayed by the fact of his wristbands being turned back half-way up his arms.

"I'm having a great tidy-up," he said, laughing at his own plight ; "everything is topsy-turvy, having been left so long ; and oh, Kate !" (this with a sudden falling and change of voice) "*his* room does look so desolate. It seems almost like despoiling a church to touch it ; yet there are many things that will be better put away out of sight before Aunt Cynthia comes home."

With his arm round Kate's shoulder, looking into her half-averted face for the sympathy he knew could not fail him, Will gave a sudden gasp of amazement, and at the same moment was conscious of that uncanny thrill passing through him which, as old women tell us, means that someone steps across the spot destined to be our grave.

Were the marvellous phases in which this Cousin Kate of his was to appear before him and perplex him, endless, indeed, as the transformations of Proteus? Was she to present herself before him now in this character, now in that, and never, never more as the bonnie, laughing, saucy Kate of the happy days of old?

The Kate of to-day was an altogether different Kate to that of yesterday.

This Kate spoke in a voice that he had never heard before; looked at him with eyes calm, sad, dreamy, as might be those of one whose brain was numbed, whose sensibilities were deadened, by the use of some narcotic. The rose had faded from her lips, her cheek was pale, and yet, wrapping her round as a mantle, was a quiet, resolute dignity that seemed to keep all the world at arm's-length,—even her cousin Will.

Chloe, with all a dog's sensitiveness to the humours of those they love, quickly recognised the fact that her blandishments were being thrown away. She looked up at Kate's set face, put her head on one side, and then trotted off, stepped gingerly into the basket, and lay down with a sigh among her jubilant babies.

There is no thermometer like your dog to tell the state of the family atmosphere.

"Let me go upstairs to Uncle Anthony's room," said Kate, in the still deliberate tone that thrilled poor Will right through and through.

As she went slowly up, he followed; the while Mrs. Dulcimer, shaking her head, betook herself to the house-keeper's room.

Mrs. Dulcimer was full of misgivings. Her own experience

in years gone by had taught her that marriage is not always a bed of roses, and as a natural result she had but a poor opinion of men—always excepting the General.

There was no one like the General, and never would be, unless it was Master Will, when a grown man. All the rest of the male sex were to be distrusted on principle. True, Mr. John Granger had a winning smile and a fine pair of eyes in his head ; but life was not all made up of smiles and eyes, and a man who had no smile to speak of, and squinted like a tom-cat in the sunshine, might be a kinder husband and wear better than—

Well ! well ! Mrs. Dulcimer hoped Miss Kate was happy, but she didn't look like it ; and perhaps, all things considered, it was just as well the General was—

Here her thoughts grew incoherent again, and she had to put her apron to her eyes.

"There's such a thing as people being too full of pleasant words, which are but tinkling cymbals," said the good woman at last aloud to Chloe who, seeing something was wrong, had come out of her basket, and was standing on her hind legs by the housekeeper's knee. "There is such a thing as being sweet as sugar and false as Ananias and Sophia."

"Mr. John was wonderfully sweet spoken," said Mrs. Dulcimer, "but, after all, Chloe, perhaps he was too full of applause—perhaps it didn't count for much after marriage, my girl."

It will be seen that Mrs. Dulcimer's language, though forcible, was not always correct. If gently reproved for words misplaced, she was apt to say it was "all very well, but she knew what she meant," apparently considering that this reasoning answered all objections ; and so it came about that Will had quite a collection of what he called "Dulcimerisms," and, in merry mood, would sometimes quote them to her face, without her being in the least degree aware of the fact.

But though the tongue might err, the heart was in the

right place, and "Dulce," as Kate and Will used to call her in the days of their childhood, worshipped the ground the "family" walked upon. She had her own ideas, had Dulce, on the subject of Miss Catherine's marriage. Those solitary visits to the old home were not to her liking.

"It's peekin' and pinin' she is after the days as have for ever fled ; that's what it is," said Mrs. Dulcimer to herself and Chloe on more than one occasion.

But not a word of these misgivings had she breathed to Master Will. In her eyes he was still a child, and that dainty golden moustache of his a mere piece of impertinence.

"It's just like Master Will to set up such a thing as that," Dulcie had observed to a friend that very morning ; "he was always a bold spirit of a boy from the first. Didn't he once swing the towel-horse before my window, with a false donkey's head on one end, and the dust switch by way of a tail, on the other, and me with my Lady Murray's own gentlewoman to tea, and a repetition to lose ? He'd a string to the head and a string to the tail, and he made it prance ever so, and I went up soft and light, and there he was, leaning right out of the window above, nigh bursting with laughter, and Miss Catherine looking on as pleased as pleased. Oh, but she had a laugh ! It was for all the world like the ringing of silver bells."

Here Mrs. Dulcimer pulled up short. She was not going to gratify the curiosity of an outsider by drawing a contrast between the Miss Catherine of that day and the Mrs. Granger of this, though in her heart the thought rose up vividly enough to make her feel as if she had an apple in her throat.

Will Pierrepont himself was not far from the same condition as he watched his cousin Kate in the General's own room. There is the deep-lying pathos of silence, as well as the passion of words. Kate said little ; but such a look was on her face as made Will almost fancy that the spirit of the dead was holding direct communion with her. The rapt gaze, the tender, regretful smile, the loving touch laid on every little familiar little object—what did these mean ?

"One would almost fancy she was taking farewell of the place for ever," thought Will.

At last Kate seated herself in the low lounge chair that faced the window. She laid her head back upon the cushion, and drew a long, deep breath.

"Will," she said, looking up at him with those wistful eyes that had such a strange, misty look in their brown depths ; "did you ever hear these lines :

"The saddest thing in life is Love,
The sweetest thing is Best."

With what loving tenderness, with what immeasurable yearning, she uttered that one last word !

"Kate," he said—"Kate! Oh, my dear, are you ill ?"

"No," she answered, letting her hand lie still and nerveless in his ; "only tired—so tired. You are young, and full of life and spirit, you cannot understand what it is to feel weary of all the world. Sometimes, Will, I think the dead are to be envied. 'They rest, we said, their sleep is sweet.' It is a long time since I slept really sweet, peaceful sleep ; perhaps I never shall again."

"I wish Aunt Cynthia would hurry home," said Will, rumpling his hair up more than it already was—a somewhat unnecessary proceeding. "You will be better and happier when she comes, won't you, dear ?"

"I suppose I shall ; she is always very good, Aunt Cynthia. Do you remember how she would nod when we read Browning aloud to Uncle Anthony, and then wake up with a jerk, and say, 'Beautiful indeed !' I fancy I see the smile on his dear, kind face as he turned to me with such a sly gleam of fun in his eyes. My God ! I wish I could see him now—I wish I could hear his voice, and feel his hand upon my shoulder as I used to do. He would hardly call me his Bonnie Kate though. I am not very 'Bonnie' now, am I, Will ?"

"Always to me—always to me," said poor Will, kneeling at

her side, and debating with himself whether he should not call good old Dulce. "Do not speak like that, Kate ; you break my heart ! Oh, my dear, I know things have gone hardly with you."

"Who said they had gone hardly with me ?" she asked sharply, with a sudden change of mood. "Who said so? Not I. It is only that I am tired—tired of what none of us can get rid of—myself."

Will longed to ask if that dreadful woman who called herself everybody's "Aunt Libbie" was about to return whence she had come, but dared not touch upon a subject that might lead he knew not where.

"Do not look at me like that," said Kate, with a wan, pitiful little smile ; "I do not want to make you sad. There is no reason why I should. All this folly of mine only means that I cannot reconcile myself to being—a failure. I think I have heard it said, or perhaps I have read it somewhere, that most people find it hard to realise and to bear that. If so, I am no wiser than most people, for I find it very hard indeed."

Feeling on sadly uncertain ground, Will did what the brickdust-coloured pony would have done under the same circumstances—he jibbed.

"Kate, look at the river ; did you ever see it look more beautiful ! Why, it just *asks* us to go out upon it. Come, my dear ; it will be quite like old times."

Then he remembered that it would never again be quite like old times, and his lower lip trembled like a woman's.

But Kate did not heed the slip. He had been wiser than he knew or designed to be, in the sudden change of subject. It had acted as does a sudden dash of cold water in the face of a person who is fainting.

For a while the spectres that were haunting Kate retreated.

She passed her hand across her eyes, rose to her feet, and looked out upon the golden river. For golden it was, flowing on between its green and flowery banks, with the trees bending low, as if in love towards its bright and sparkling face.

The loosestrife and the kingcups were nodding in the breeze again ; the little moor-hens darted in and out of the reeds, and played hide-and-seek among the osiers ; and there was the boat—Will's own boat—bobbing sleepily up and down beside the steps.

"Yes," said Kate, "let us go—not far, for I must not be late in getting home ; but as far as the narrow bend where the willows meet above the water. I should like to see that spot once more."

"Once more ! Ten times more—twenty times more," said Will, "I intend to ask John to let me take you out in the boat every day while I am at home."

This was said tentatively—shyly, just to show his cousin Kate that he had no idea of dealing hardly or keeping up any ill-feeling with the man whom she held so dear ; but he laughed, a ringing, boyish laugh, as he added :

"And I'll take old Aunt What's-her-name with us, if you like, now and again."

He had been wanting to make some allusion to Miss Libbie all this time, just to show that—for Kate's sake—he was going to bury the hatchet—deep down too—and trample the earth hard above it.

There never was a brighter, truer, more generous nature than William Dennis Pierrepont's—never.

Well might Aunt Cynthia call him "bright boy" and "sunbeam," and half-a-dozen other pretty names, for such natures are indeed as light shining out in the dark places of the earth, and making us in love with humanity for their sakes.

Mrs. Dulcimer, tall and stately in her black silk afternoon gown, came out on to the lawn to see her young master and "Miss Catherine" embark in the dear old "Daffodil." It was like, and it wasn't like, the dear old days before the old home was broken up by severance, death, and absence. Good Dulce watched them through such a mist as required her spectacles to be taken off and carefully polished no less

than three times. Chloe, too, came out to see what was doing, and when she heard the rattle of the chain and saw Kate step into the stern and take the rudder-lines, grew wildly excited. Chloe was torn in two. On the one side was the longing to go and sit at the extreme end of the Daffodil's prow and feel that the boat belonged to her; on the other, the little mother-heart yearned over the black-faced babies in the round basket.

There stood the little animal with one fawn-coloured foot raised in tremulous indecision.

"Chloe, Chloe!" cried Will, and she flew to the water-side. Then some thought struck her suddenly, and, after almost over-balancing herself head-foremost into the river, she tore off into the house.

"Poor Chloe! She can't make up her mind to desert her family," said Will, and shoved the Daffodil out from the bank.

The last thing they saw as they glided up stream was Mrs. Dulcimer's respectful wave of the hand, and a little wistful black face, with snub nose mightily uplifted, peeping round the jamb of the doorway.

Will's sculls caught the water with strong, swift stroke, and the Daffodil, making smooth and rapid way, set the pretty shadows throbbing as she passed. Birds sang overhead, here and there a fish leapt, and on the surface of the river silver rings rose and widened even to the bank, kissing the feet of the reeds and the blue-eyed forget-me-nots.

The brown river-rat looked bronzed and ruddy in the sun, and as he swam, all fearless, from marge to marge, "long the track of light he left behind him," for each ripple seemed a shivered diamond, and his uplifted nose floated in a circling rainbow.

"Kate," said Will, breaking a silence that had lasted long, and that he feared—he knew not why—"tell me some more about that droll girl with the odd name."

"*Melissa?*"

"Ah yes; Melissa." The young scapegrace knew it all the time; indeed, he had it off by heart. "She must be a good sort to have stood between you and the old lady like that, and I'm glad she set down that beast Bud, and kept him in his right place."

Kate apparently did not hear the concluding part of this speech. She turned such a sad, set, weary face upon Will by way of reply, that he took three or four strokes quite out of rhythm, and altogether conducted himself wholly unlike the accomplished oarsman he was.

"Melissa?" she said—"oh yes: I will tell you what to say to Melissa if ever——" (then she corrected herself) "when you see her. Tell her I shall never forget her and all her kindness to me—never, wherever I may be. Do not fail to tell her that."

Will began to think that, after all, silence might be preferable to speech when speech so mystified a man, and made him handle his sculls in such a fashion as might well result in his being taken for a rank outsider by anyone walking on the bank.

"You are more likely to see Miss Sweetapple" (he had very nearly said Melissa) "than I am."

"Am I?" said Kate, and she had such a strange, eerie look about her as she spoke that he thought the best thing he could do was to hold his tongue.

Kate seemed quite content that this should be so. Her eyes rested quietly and dreamily on the beauteous scenes through which they passed.

With every moment the river grew more golden, the shadows deeper and clearer, the sky more amethyst and opal.

Now they were under the chequered shadows of the arching willows, where the light was all emerald, and the sunshine filtering from above flickered and danced on the green water.

Slower and slower beat the pulsation of the sculls, and at

last with a soft bump the nose of the Daffodil ran into the mossy bank.

This lovely shadowy bower, roofed in by the willows, was a sort of creek into which you turned, leaving the open track of the river. It opened on to meadow lands now starred with gilded buttercups, the fair veronica washed its blue eyes in its outermost ripples, and the tall orchids gazed at their own reflections in the shining mirror of its surface.

"Let us rest here a moment," said Kate, "I want to look at every corner of Uncle Anthony's green bower; I want to take it in; to make such a clear mind-picture of it that I shall be able to recall it when I shut my eyes and think of it. Will, do you remember it was here we brought him the last time of all? I think I can see now the smile with which he looked all round the screen of tender leaves, through which the sunshine dropped, and said, with a happy sigh, 'How beautiful!' I am glad we came here to-day; I am glad I have seen the place again."

"Which thou canst do, cousin mine, many times and oft, an thou wilt. John may find time to come too, may he not? and we might even bring Miss—Miss Elizabeth, mightn't we? Only that she looks like a sort of person who would be sea-sick, even in the Daffodil."

It suddenly dawned upon him that he might as well suggest escorting the whole Low Cross family at once, for Kate was not listening, did not hear him.

"Let us go back now," she said, with a regretful, lingering glance round the green bower of gently-stirring leaves; "I must not be late in getting home."

They shot out from the shimmer of the pale, emerald radiance, and were soon on the broad breast of lovely Thames.

Will, watching Kate still, saw that she seemed to be gazing somewhere very far away—into the vista of the past, he fancied. If he spoke to her she answered in a calm and quiet voice, and then lapsed into silence, as might one roused from sleep, who speaks dreamily, and falls to sleeping again.

In reality to her the sculls, as with gentle strength they cut the water, seemed to fall and rise with a strange rhythm, of which the burden ran : "To be at rest—to be at rest—at rest—at rest."

As a child's trouble dies beneath the pressure of a mother's hand, Kate's sorrows and perplexities seemed to sink into quietude under the soft beat of that slumberous refrain.

The sun-bright river, Will's dear, kind face opposite to her, all grew to be, as it were, part and parcel of a dream—some phase and picture through which she was gliding to reach a place of silence and peace.

"To be at rest—to be at rest," that was what the river said.

Ah, how she longed for rest—rest from the turmoil and the strife—rest from the hot pulse of life that beat in upon her brain, dazing her sight, and making her reel as she stepped. It had all been a mistake, those passing sweet days of love's most sweet uncertainties and tender fears, that time to which she could look back as to a new creation.

Might she not then have cried with noble Portia :—

"O Love, be moderate ; allay thy ecstasy ;
In measure rain thy joy : scant thy excess.
I feel too much thy blessing : make it less,
For fear I surfeit."

And was all the memory of those days to be as a fair thing blighted ? Was it true that she had best have turned her lips aside from the sweet chalice offered to them ? Were the days by the sea, when she and John were first given wholly each to the other, when

"Love took up the harp of life,
And smote on all the chords with might,"

when passion pulsed in the throb and fall of the wave on the shore, and the silver moonlight, kissing the sea, seemed

an emblem of two hearts closely drawn together for all time —was that blessed time overshadowed too by the sorrow that had now come to pass? Was it true that in the end it would have been better had “like wed with like”—had John mated with his own kind, and she with hers?

Kate would never have admitted even the possibility of these things, though all the voices of all the world had combined to declare them so, only for one thing; only because John—her love, her darling, her husband—had been conscious of a discord, had felt the price he had paid for his happiness too great; had, doubtless in some moment of heat and unrest, let others into the secret of his misgivings.

Everything was wrong, herself included. It would have been better for John Granger had he never seen her. She would not allow the converse of this. No! All she had suffered, all she was suffering, and a thousand-fold added to it, was not too dear a price for the joy that she had known, not by one single jot or tittle; but the sad part of it was that she could not suffer alone. John had to endure his share. She could not undo the past. Well, she must try to spare him in the future.

As they reached the boathouse Mrs. Dulcimer, full of matronly anxiety for Kate, came down to the bank, eager to greet them. She helped Mrs. John to land, and inquired if she were not tired.

“It’s all very well to take plenty of exercise, Miss Catherine,” she said, with a confidential air; “but it must be done with conservancy.”

Kate looked into the kindly old face, and Dulce saw with terror something like tears in her eyes.

“Come in and get a cup of tea before you start home—do,” she said hurriedly. “Here’s Chloe out of herself at seeing you back. She was in two minds, was Chloe, not knowing whether to go or stay; but she settled herself down with the *puppies* quite contemptible-like after you were clean out of sight.”

Kate hardly noticed the quaint "derangement of epitaphs" in these kindly suggestions. She would have no tea; she wanted to get home; and Will, something scared by her pallor and the calm, quiet voice so unlike her old, impulsive, vehement self, yielded to her wish, and after changing his clothes quickly, set off with her *en route* for Kensington. He noticed the same silence, the same dreamy look, all the way. He told her that the authorities at the Foreign Office had given him some weeks' grace; he should see her again, many times, before he really got into harness. She slipped her hand into his, and it struck cold to him through her glove; but she did not say she was glad.

"It is that horrible old woman she is afraid of," he said to himself, adding mentally an anathema that was just as well not uttered aloud.

But when, on their arrival, the "horrible old woman" came hastily to the door to meet them, lo! like Bottom, she was "translated." Her face looked pinched and worn—that is, more pinched and more worn than it usually did. Besides this, Miss Libbie looked afraid. And her civility to Mr. Pierrepont was something almost painful.

"Tea's all ready spread," she said; "come in and bide—do."

For Will had made as though he would take leave of his cousin.

"I cannot," he said regretfully. "I'll come to-morrow; tell John I'll come to-morrow. I haven't seen him yet. I must rush off now to Whitehall; I have an appointment there. Miss—Miss Elizabeth, I think my cousin is overtired; take care of her."

Then he kissed Kate—Miss Libbie, in her present state of mind, would have been glad if he had kissed her too—and then he was off. Kate watched him from the steps with such a wistful weary look upon her face that even Miss Libbie was softened.

"Come in, my—my dear," she said; "the tea is spread."

But Kate shook her head, and went straight upstairs to her own room. Miss Libbie, following, when she was half-way up, heard the key turn in the lock, whereat Thomas Granger's sister wished with all her heart—and there was a good deal of it, though it had some nasty black spots—that she were once more safe with "brother," even in his gruffest moods, and had never come "to see London town before she died."

John was to have come home to dinner that night; but there was a telegram to say he was detained, and could not get away until nine.

When he did come he was jaded and done. Life is not all smooth lines even to a "rising" and successful man. Things had not gone to his liking, and, late as it was, there were letters that must be written.

He was bending over his desk when the door opened softly and his wife came in.

"You look tired, my darling," he said. "Sit down here by me while I write; I shan't be long about it."

So Kate took her place on the little low chair that was called "her own," and then he noticed that she had her morning dress on, and looked even more tired than he had at first supposed. He put his finger under her round white chin, and tilted the dear face up to his own.

"What have you been doing to tire yourself so?" he said, affecting a playful sternness.

"I have been out with Will on the river."

His hand fell; he bent low over his papers.

That was it, was it?

Kate had been with her cousin, and who might say what trying turn the interview could not have taken?

"He said I was to tell you he should come—to-morrow."

Surely Kate had been hurrying downstairs at a break-neck pace, for her breath came strangely short, and he could see the shimmer of the sweat that beaded on her brow.

Awhile she spoke of this thing or that; then, drawing a

long, shuddering breath, she drew his hand against her face, laying her cheek against it tenderly.

"Sweetheart," she said, speaking almost in a whisper—"my sweetheart—my love!" Then her mood changed. "I am not very good to-night, John, interrupting you like this; I . . . will . . . go . . . now."

The words dropped slowly from lips as white as the rose that nestled at her throat, and gave out its scent so sweetly.

"Do, dear," said John, looking at her with loving, anxious eyes; "I will follow quickly."

"Will you?" she said, and stood there at the open door with such a look upon her face as might have made his heart stand still in his breast had he seen it; but the shaded lamp upon the desk left a disc of gloom outside its own circle of light.

The letters he had to write that night took John Granger longer than he had imagined. It was late when the last one was signed and sealed, and the house was quiet and still, Miss Libbie having gone to her room, and the servants to bed.

After seeing that all was safe as to bolts and bars, John went quickly upstairs, opening the door of his chamber softly so as not to disturb the dear sleeper within. He need not have been so tenderly cautious, there was no one there; and something struck him as strange and unfamiliar in all the surroundings—what, he could not tell.

He passed on to his dressing-room—empty also.

Not quite, though, for, placed upon the mantelshelf so as to catch the eye at once, was a letter addressed to himself in his wife's handwriting. Another moment and such a cry rang through the quiet house as brought Miss Libbie rushing from her room; only, however, to find herself grasped by the arm with a force that at any other time would have made her scream aloud.

She found herself led, or rather dragged, into the empty bedroom, and the door closed and locked.

"Now tell me what you know of all this—what hand you have had in it! Where has my wife gone?"

Alas ! Miss Libbie's face had been her own accuser. Guilt was written in every line of it. Never was so scared, so trembling, so miserable a creature as Miss Libbie Granger, of Low Cross Farm, at that moment.

John looked so wild, so thoroughly capable of shaking the words out of her if she did not speak of her own free will, that she stammered out :

"I, John—what should I have do with it ? What should I know about it ?

"Your face betrays you," he cried. "You must have driven her desperate before she would have left me—me whom she loved, unworthy as I am, dearer than life itself—me whom she called her 'sweetheart' not two hours ago. Speak, woman ! Tell me, *what have you done?*"

The worst had happened. Miss Libbie had been called a "woman."

But she was past resenting anything. She never knew how it was that she found herself down on her two knees on the carpet, holding up her trembling hands as to one about to strike and take her life. She never knew what she said, or how she made confession of wrong that she knew must be beyond forgiveness, or what she kept back from that instinct of self-preservation that never failed her.

When she told John of the meeting between Kate and her young cousin, and that she (Miss Libbie) had accused her of "making too free," John was like one distraught.

"You said that to her—you spoke to her as you might to a scullery-wench—to her, to Kate—my wife ! My God ! it is terrible—it is beyond belief!"

The only signs that told of poor, misguided Kate's footsteps were the scattered petals of the rose that John had noticed at her breast when she left him.

There they were—one here, another there—on the stairs, in the hall, and when John rushed out wildly to the gate, three or four lay on the garden pathway.

He had to stoop and seek them by the glimmer of the gas-lamp overhead, and as he raised them he pressed them to his lips and sobbed, though no merciful tear softened the burning light of his strained eyes.

"We have lost time already," he said, a horrible fear, that he would not clothe in words, thrilling him through and through; "let me go—let me go."

For Miss Libbie was clinging to him, begging and praying to be "let see" the letter he had found.

She was remorseful, frightened almost out of her life, but still curious as ever. For all answer he crumpled the paper into his pocket, crammed his hat on his head, bade her keep her tongue still and not alarm the servants, and was gone out into the night, where the cloud-drifts floated across a fitful moon.

We have seen Miss Libbie in all sorts of equivocal and unpleasant positions; we have seen her playing the meanest parts, guilty of the cruellest wrongs, but indeed it may be safely said she made some expiation for her sins during that long and lonely night of solitary vigil.

CHAPTER XXI.

DROMORE.

THEY were magnificent gate-posts ; tall and stately, built of grey stone, and one of them was crowned by a great, round, smooth globe of stone that one might fancy giants playing at marbles with. True, there was only one, but its fellow lay half buried in moss and periwinkle, and that wonderful “morning glory” that wraps everything in a mantle of green the moment it gets the chance, so that you could easily imagine what the general effect had been, and admire it in your “mind’s eye.” It may be objected that there were no gates.

True again, but reflect how much trouble in the way of opening and shutting was saved by this simple fact. No getting down off the box and stopping the horse short to its manifest discontent ; no stopping ; but in you went with one smooth, uninterrupted swing, through the garden, and up to the portals of Dromore. There was no fear that you should make any mistake in the name of the house, for there it was written up, twice over, on each gate-post.

Lichens and moss grew all over these tall, massive gate-posts, showing beautiful patches of colour, russet-red, and olive-green, and pearly-grey ; but these soft hues were the tints of decay, the dregs left by the passing of the river of time ; the signs of neglect, of poverty, of a piteous decadence, of cruel fall from a once high estate.

The carriage-way that led through these time-embossed *portals* was carpeted with fine grass, down-pressed by no rolling

wheels, nor, save for one narrow pathway, by the tread of feet. The daisies grew amongst it at their will ; here and there the periwinkle and the morning glory stretched out a long arm half-way across it, and, midway to the house, a clump of bold-faced celandines had taken up a prominent position almost in the centre of it. The house itself was of stone, with deep mullioned windows, and a crazy porch, of which one pillar had fallen away, and the architrave with it, which gave a notion of instability to those newly introduced to it. People familiar with it would have laughed at such a notion. Had not Dromore been like that ever since anyone could remember ? No one would believe in it being Dromore at all if it were neat and taut, and all in straight lines like other houses ; and as to the garden, why, it had run wild so long, and become such a tangle of greenery and blossoms, that it possessed all the grace and beauty of some wild creature never tamed by the hand of man, nor yet likely to be.

Opposite the house, under a cedar tree, was a long, wide stone-bench, broken somewhat at one end, to be in keeping with the rest of its surroundings, but kept from being smothered up in teeming vegetation by the shadow of the cedar above it. This bench was a pleasant place enough in summer time, when the soft, balmy air that is softer and balmier in Ireland than in any other country in the world, buffeted your face gently and tenderly, and the sunshine peeped at you shyly through the covert of the level cedar boughs.

There was a unique peculiarity about the large mullioned window with three lights that flanked the right side of the porch at Dromore. A sort of table, fitted in exactly to the bend of the sill, ran all the way round it, and here were displayed all sorts of little knitted garments—hoods and socks, and tiny petticoats about as deep as your hand, apparently only fit for dolls ; also what are called “samples” in wool-work—that is, pretty, delicately-traced patterns on canvas, with just one corner worked in to show what the whole would

be like. Tiny china saucers were set at distances round these tables, each containing marvellously-tinted beads of different sizes and shapes, and a shallow, open work-basket of silver and plated thimbles completed the show. Not, however, that these pretty articles were all that was to be seen through the rose-wreathed window.

Two snow-white Quaker caps, clipping round two gentle faces with hair put simply back beneath the Puritan headgear—two dear gentlewomen, each with a small white shawl pinned with mathematical exactness over gowns the colour of the lichens on the old stone walls—gowns so straight and plain they hardly seemed to show a fold—these were what was to be seen through the mullioned window.

Dear friends, from out the far dim past let your gentle figures rise before me, and dower my pen with skill to limn your portraits tenderly and well!

The word “gentlewomen” is set down advisedly to describe these sisters, even though the long table, near which one or other or both might generally be seen, came perilously near that bar sinister, the counter. Not softer were the many-hued wools they dealt in than the hands that knitted them so deftly; not purer were the hanks of snowy “fleecy” than the hearts that beat beneath the prim white shawls and closely-fitting gowns of grey.

Faith and Prudence Worthy were the names of these two inmates of Dromore; but the last name was seldom heard, as Friend Faith and Friend Prudence did duty for all else.

Of the former it may be said that her name was her truest emblem. Hers was one of those calm and chastened souls we meet with at times in this world to assure us of the existence of the one that is spiritual and unseen. It is as if we came upon the inhabitant of a strange and far country, and that country should become to us real and vivid, though our eyes had never seen it, because of the stranger and pilgrim who sojourned in our midst.

One might well fancy that something of the childlike and

devout spirit of the weaver's son, the lonely shepherd full of mystic communings with God and Nature, who first founded the Society of Friends, had descended upon Faith Worthy and taken up its abode in her heart.

A reserved and self-disciplined enthusiast, it seemed not so much that she had to turn to her religion for guidance and comfort as to something outside herself, as that its light ever burned with steady and enduring flame, part and parcel of herself, embodied and materialised in her life and thoughts.

There were occasions, few and far between, when Friend Faith spoke at meeting—occasions never to be forgotten by those who were present ; times and seasons when her hearers seemed lifted out of this world altogether, and led into the actual warmth and light of the Peace of God which passeth all understanding. Through pinching poverty, through family trials of quite extraordinary acuteness, the still shining of this heavenly peace had never faded from Faith Worthy's heart ; the lamp had never even flickered. If her cheek was thin, if the knuckles on her helpful hands were too plainly visible, if everything about her spoke of that most pathetic of all kinds of poverty—never having quite enough, no one ever heard her murmur.

Neither, for that matter, was Friend Prudence given to grumbling, but there was a faint spice of a gentle sort of worldliness about Miss Prudence (the "Miss" comes handier to her). She was ten years her sister's junior, and in a bye-gone day a pretty, demure little face had been discernible under that deep pent-house, her Quaker bonnet. Even now she wore her cap and shawl "with a difference," and was not unconscious of sloping shoulders, a delicate waist, that fifty winters had not robbed her of, and a "crinkle" in the still brown hair that no amount of cold water would smooth out—even if she had wished it should, which may be doubted.

Friend Faith believed that no such beautiful creature as her sister Prudence had ever been seen ; but she regarded this fact

as a thing never to be alluded to, and, indeed, was wont to check herself in the inclination to feel some pride in it. "Favour is deceitful and beauty vain." Friend Faith was familiar enough with those words of one whose experience gives him a right to be heard, but for all that, the knowledge did not prevent her from time to time casting a shy glance of pride and approval at Friend Prudence in her Sabbath gown and grey bonnet, beneath which the cheek was still soft and round, and the dark eyes bright as they were thirty years ago.

Simple, active, temperate lives leave few lines as traces of their passing ; and a certain youthfulness may be extended even to the verge of old age. The brunt of all the family trouble among the Worthys had always fallen upon the elder sister ; she had screened the younger one as much as possible from the blasts of misfortune, and many a time and oft in the days gone by, by quiet and secret self-denial, had she devised little luxuries and dainties for pretty Prudence.

There was no handmaid kept at Dromore. Thrice a week or so, a person who called herself Biddy, came in to do a certain amount of rough cleaning. Biddy was an Irishwoman of the truest type. Her mouth seemed to reach nearly from ear to ear ; her nose was latent in the bridge, and well-developed at the wide, upturned tip ; her smile ready, her willingness unfailing ; her heart a heart of gold ; and her ways leaving much to be desired as to order and method. The simplest child of Irish Catholicism, she was as full of picturesque superstitions as an egg is full of meat ; and nothing could well be more racy, had anyone been there to enjoy it, than the contrast of Biddy and the Quaker surroundings of Dromore. She would cross herself if she came upon a hand-basin left with standing water in it over-night. Were not the fairies known to have their haunts where such negligence existed ? If she overset a chair (and such an occurrence was by no means rare) she was in great consternation to think that "*the devil was laughing*"—though the why and the wherefore of

this droll behaviour on his part appeared somewhat inexplicable. To hear Biddy recounting these marvellous articles of belief to Friend Faith, and to see Friend Faith's tender toleration of the same—that was pretty too.

Once when Prudence was sick—sick, as it seemed, nigh unto death—Biddy kept vigil for ten long days and nights, always made up into a strange bundle of clothes, always willing, zealous, full of the true, passionate sympathy that only those of her nation can give—the sympathy that is so upholding because it folds about you like a loving arm ; and when Friend Faith urged upon her the necessity of sleep, replied, that “Sure she could sleep on one leg like a burred, for matter of that,” and was none the worse for never seeing the inside of her bed.

One thing was an awful scare to Biddy in those days of sorrow and waiting. She was used to the wildest outpourings of grief—the “keen” of the mourner, the awful croon of those who watch by the dead ; but to peep into the sparsely-furnished room that was Friend Faith's, and see the motionless figure of that dear lady seated with folded hands and tearless face, white as that of a statue, and as still—to see her with lips that never stirred nor made a moan, with no beads to tell, and no book to read out of, with nothing but those pale, folded hands and calm, up-looking eyes.

“ You might have knocked me down wid a feather the first time I caught sight of her,” said Biddy, in the privacy of her own home. “ And, sure, it was spakin' wid the blessed saints she was, and down I fell on my knees in the passage, and up with a prayer to the blessed St. Joseph, who hears us in sorrow ; an’—glory be to God !—that night Miss Prudence she mended, and I clean lost my senses for joy, and had liked to have kissed Miss Faith on both of her cheeks, but held back for fear, and just kissed the spaldeen of a dog that steals every bone in the larder instead.”

The rapt woman holding silent communion with the spirit that ruled her life—with the God from whose verdict she

recognised no appeal ; and there, outside in the twilight, the passionate-hearted Celt, importuning High Heaven according to her lights, with tears, and sighs, and strange ejaculations. . . .

What a picture—what a contrast—and how beautiful the sympathy that drew together the widely diverse leadings like a golden link !

It has been said that Faith Worthy sheltered her sister as much as might be from the burden and pain of family sorrows and trials ; but there was one “skeleton in the cupboard” at Dromore that neither could ignore—that was their brother Benjamin. In age he came between the two ; in appearance he “favoured” his sister Prudence ; for the rest—

Well, let us sketch him as he sat on the wide stone bench under the cedar-tree, his dog and inseparable companion “Yap” by his side.

Friend Benjamin wore the Quaker habit, the wide-brimmed hat, the long Puritan coat. Every article of his attire was a marvel of neatness and cleanliness, a wonder of patchings almost invisible from the skill with which they were put in—of being turned and made the best of—of being smoothed, and brushed, and generally brightened up.

From under the broad brim of his hat fell lint-white locks, white with a silvery whiteness, like spun glass in the sunshine, showing startlingly against the sombre brown of his coat. When he turned his face towards you, you saw that these venerable locks surrounded the face of a child. The eyes pale-blue and widely-opened, vacant, dreamy ; the mouth loose-lipped, ever smiling ; the cheek and chin smooth as a woman’s ; the voice high-pitched and boyish : such was Benjamin Worthy, even from his birth until now. And all through the long years, since the mother died when Prudence was but a stripling girl, he had been the precious charge, the tenderly-cherished child—for indeed he was no more—of the *two sisters*, the one haunting fear of their lives being that in *some day of dread and terror* he might be forcibly taken from

their keeping. Year by year they had watched the strange malady, the “cloud,” as someone too truthfully put it, that hovered over his life, fitfully changing from better to worse, and at times—times that strained the calm faith of the elder sister as did no other affliction—rising to a flood, then ebbing when fears were at the highest.

Ireland is the home of the cultus of the “natural.” To show courtesy, to speak a hard word, to one who is “simple” is to bring the dreaded “bad luck” upon yourself. A person so afflicted might wander from one end of the country to the other and meet with nothing but kindness. To the people—many of them poor and half-starved—round about Dromore, Friend Benjamin was a sacred creature. To present him with fruit or flowers was looked upon as a high privilege by the simple peasants, and in his own half-witted way he enjoyed this popularity; even making friends with the jolly-faced priest of the little church near the sea—for we are in a small sort of settlement half-way between the big city of Dublin and the coast—and that kindly-hearted man would remind his people that the “invincible ignorance” of this gentle, harmless one set him in quite a different category from other more knowledgeable “heretics.” This verdict upon poor Benjamin’s spiritual state naturally heightened the estimation in which he was held by the good folks of Green Dales, by which name the clusters of hovels and cottages, and the one or two houses of more pretension scattered about here and there, were known.

And well did the place deserve its name—no greener or more verdant spot could well be imagined: worthy, indeed, was it of being a portion of the island that is well called emerald. There is a softness about the climate of Ireland, seen indeed, to its highest extent in lovely Glengariff and fair Killarney, but perceptible all over the country. If her skies shed many tears—and God wot, she has had sorrows enough to weep for!—her smile is so sweet and bright you are in love with a land that has much of changeful April in its nature.

combined with the softness of Italy or Mentone ; and between smiles and tears the lovely blossoms are born, and the emerald grass and waving trees clothe the earth with a beauty never to be forgotten.

All this verdure was in its fulness, for the summer approached its zenith, when Friend Benjamin sat on the wide stone bench with Yap, the dog, by his side.

Now a word of Yap. Introduced with an apology, because of the long string of dogs to be found among the *dramatis personæ* of this story, but also presented to the reader in the full confidence that he will win his way—his prototype always did, even with those who considered themselves by no means “dog lovers”—and further allowed to make his bow to the British Public—with a big B and a big P, since both Yap and I hope to make a very considerable circle of acquaintances—because the portrait of his gentle master would be incomplete without him.

Yap had evidently intended to be a broken-haired terrier, but had failed to realise his ideal. Still, the intention was apparent, and ought to count, for good intentions always seem to me to count for something, and should rather be compared to blighted buds that might have been flowers, rather than to stones to pave a certain allegorical place of abode. We will therefore credit poor Yap with wishing to be better than he was. He had a small white body, a long tail (alas !), and two yellow-brown ears, one of which he generally carried very much up, and the other very much down, while his small black eyes took in everything with a marvellous acuteness. Yap was a knowing beast in his way, and as he did not pretend to set up business in anybody else's way, no reproach could attach to him on that score.

He looked supernaturally knowing on the present occasion, having absented himself from his master's side for a while, returned, looked wistfully at the figure on the bench, and given a short sharp bark of appeal, as who should say :

“I wish you would attend to what I want to say to you, and not give all your attention to those tiresome pictures.”

For Friend Benjamin was what is called "clever with his fingers," and had a knack of cutting out birds, beasts, and fishes in black paper, and pinning them up along the wall of his own little room, an apartment which presented somewhat the appearance of an inanimate zoological gardens, in which all the animals had gone into mourning for deceased relatives.

He was just now most carefully rounding the corner of an elephant's ear, and failed for the moment to notice Yap's agitated demeanour.

As he at last looked up, the little animal leapt from the bench, and began to jump about and bark, making short runs half-way down the grassy carriage-way towards the gate-posts, and then back again.

Even to his master's dim intelligence it dawned at last that Yap had some mighty game on hand.

Friend Benjamin, with much difficulty, pulled a huge sort of pocket-book out of his coat-flap, tenderly folded the black paper elephant between two of the leaves, and looked enquiringly down at the dog, who was making a dancing dervish of himself. When he rose to his feet Yap went into an ecstasy, and the two disappeared round the curve of the pathway. The evening was coming on, and more than an hour ago Friend Faith and Friend Prudence had pulled down the blinds in the mullioned window, and closed the outer door of the crazy porch. These proceedings meant that business was over, and soon the two sisters were counting over the few—very few—shillings that represented the "take" of the day. This "take" varied considerably, a wet or cold day reducing it so low as one solitary shilling; a bright, sunny afternoon often resulting in quite a rush of customers.

For the kindly gentlewomen were known and beloved far and near, and were sometimes bidden to tea to this hospitable board or that, an invitation never accepted by both, though occasionally by one. On one occasion, a strong desire having been expressed by a visitor to make the acquaintance of both

ladies, Friend Faith arrived to tea, then retired, and was succeeded by Friend Prudence.

The simple and pathetic reason for this "one in and one out" arrangement was that only one really good and undarned gown—a marvellous garment indeed, of pearl-grey Irish Poplin—was possessed by the two, and neither felt it showing proper respect to the hostess of the house to appear in a garment otherwise than seemly and suitable.

"People put such funny things in novels!" cries some reader at this.

True, my friend, whoever you may be; but now and again the oddest things they write are simple, unvarnished realities, and of these this last is one.

Fancy the sister left at home, waiting in calm patience, with hair and cap neatly adjusted, for the return of the other—and the gown! Fancy the putting of it off, the putting of it on, the little touch here and there given by the first wearer of it to make all complete and trim for the second!

There is poverty in the world that has a more pathetic side than that of the beggar in the street, even though his rags hang never so pitifully, for he does not feel the sting of poverty as the more cultured do, nor does his pride bleed at seeking charity as would theirs.

The unpretending wool-shop closed for the day, the sisters betook themselves to an inner room.

Here again the pathetic story of refined poverty was written in plainest letters.

Every article that could by any possibility be looked upon as superfluous had long since been weeded out and disposed of. During that long illness of poor Prue's, of which mention has already been made, very many knick-knacks and pretty things disappeared from Dromore.

Each room in turn went through this thinning process; several old pictures, relics of a family state long gone by, went by the carrier to Dublin, the said carrier proving himself a perfect gentleman by affecting absolute ignorance of the

nature of the packages he conveyed, even while condoling with Biddy in secret upon the sad straits of the two dear ladies she so faithfully served.

There were no comfortable lounges, no cushioned reclining chairs at Dromore in these days, only a stony-hearted horsehair couch that shone with age till it looked at a distance as if it were made of ebony, and a quaint old wooden chair, with knitted rests for head and arms, a work of art considered to reflect great credit upon Friend Prue's ingenuity.

A long table with some tastefully-arranged flowers in a delf bowl, a knitting-table, with big bellying bag down below, and a cupboard, plain and serviceable, which held the household stores—if such a word could apply to such small garnerage—that was about all.

Curtains there were none. But the two upper panes of each window were of coloured glass, and gave a richness and glow to the interior, and made a picturesque glow behind the white-capped figures and the dove-coloured gowns.

Friend Faith sat in the cushioned chair, a white silk handkerchief spread across her lap so that the delicate wools she handled might escape even the slightest soil. Idleness was a thing unknown at Dromore.

It was hard enough to make a profit out of the little hoods and petticoats, and dainty neck-scarves and clouds, when the material was paid for, even if you worked nearly every spare moment; but Prue had been a little fragile since that long illness, and Faith had ruled that, when business hours were over, she should recline for half an hour on the shining horse-hair sofa before she set herself to prepare the evening meal that was tea and supper all in one.

She lay there now—a slender figure against the black—wary with standing to serve at the “table,” as the improvised counter was called, and conscious of an ache in her back, and an all too worldly longing for something tasty and “nice” for tea—a longing that she knew was a thing to be sternly repressed.

Friend Faith, slender too, but upright as a dart, was busy plying her crochet-needle. In and out, in and out, went the little ivory hook, and lo! a charming rose-pink bordering appeared on the frill of a baby's hood—a hood that must have been meant for a gay and worldly baby, not a Quakerly brat by any means.

"Where is Benjamin, dost thou know, Prue?" said Friend Faith, with a keen glance over the edge of the said hood, and an anxious pucker in her forehead.

"I fancied him a little restless after dinner-hour; I shall go and seek him in the garden presently, if he does not come."

Prue raised her head, listening.

"I hear Yap's bark. Benjamin cannot well be far off."

"I often wonder what our brother did before we got Yap," said Friend Faith; "the little creature has been a good gift of God."

Now, the said gift was bestowed in the following way:

Yap appeared, draggled, dirty, indigent-looking to the last degree, before the sitting-room window while the family were at their frugal breakfast.

He must have had great faith in the human kindness he appealed to, for he laid his head on the ledge of the low window, and gave a disconsolate whine.

Then they looked at him, and found that he went on three legs instead of four—in a word, one of his hind-legs was broken, and hung pitifully.

It was soon set, and Yap lying comfortably on the well-worn rug, drinking with evident zest and relish the share of the milk that rightfully ought to have belonged to Friend Faith, that dear soul sipping her milkless coffee with the utmost content and simplicity of purpose.

After this, of course, Yap found a home at Dromore, and each day developed in him qualities of the most endearing kind.

Another gift of Heaven came to Dromore in the form of a

thrush, mauled cruelly by an evil-disposed cat, and rescued from that animal's jaws by Benjamin himself. This creature, too, was resuscitated, and paid his dole of tuneful song for the hospitality he received.

And so it came to pass that these three dear people, who had hard work to keep the food in their own mouths, managed to feed also the two needy creatures that misfortune had driven to Dromore for sanctuary.

Even now, as Prue listened for her brother's step, the mellow piping of the thrush—who had never fully recovered from his mauling, and could not have provided for himself if he had been turned loose—made itself heard in Biddy's kitchen.

Then there was a crunching on the grassy gravel, a pull at the porch door, and Benjamin Worthy came in, Yap at his heels, of course.

Whatever doubt there might be about his master's state of mind, there could be none as to the restlessness of Yap. He ran round the room, sniffed at this and that, whined a little squeaking whine, and stood with one paw in air and his left ear cocked at an absolutely absurd angle.

As for Benjamin, he stole across the room in the most wonderful manner, as if he were treading upon eggs. He kept putting his finger to his lips and saying :

“ Hush, hush ! keep silence every one—keep silence ! Lie down, Yap, and do not stir. Hush, my dog, hush ! ”

A spasm of pain passed over Friend Prue's face. She had not yet learned the stern self-discipline of the elder sister. If Friend Faith's sunken cheek grew a shade whiter, it was all the emotion she allowed herself to show. This trial of theirs was very bitter.

For days, sometimes for weeks, their brother would be almost—never quite, but still almost—like other people. He would talk comparatively sensibly ; he would recognise his own identity and theirs ; then, all at once, like water suddenly stirred and troubled, the “ cloud ” came over him.

There was no limit to the extravagant fancies that would

then possess him ; there was no limit to the suffering of those who watched him. They would try to get him to his own room, and to keep him there.

Sometimes they would succeed ; sometimes not ; sometimes he would wander to the woods and fields, or to the shallow, sandy shore ; Heaven only knew where he would go or how he would be brought back to them.

It was but a week ago that one of these "spells" had left him—physically a little feeble, as they always did, but sane, and still their own.

And now, what weird fancy was about to seize him and hold him as of old the evil spirits were said to hold men in possession ?

"Thou hadst better seek the tea," said Faith, still plying her ivory hook, and, by a great effort, keeping her hand from trembling, and the rose-pink border from destruction.

Prue rose quickly, but her brother hastily placed himself between her and the door, moving back until he rested against it, and holding up his finger to command the silence of the world.

"Hush !" he said, speaking in a whisper that thrilled his hearers ; "she is asleep among the daisies ; thee will wake her."

Poor Prue wrung her hands. She was not very strong-minded, poor Prue, and she dreaded these spells with an almost morbid dread, and with a dread that grew.

"Some day," she would say to Faith, "they will take him from us ; they will put him somewhere where we cannot see him ; and, Faith ! Faith ! I shall die."

"Nay, thou wilt not," would Faith reply. "God would uphold thee even in that sea of bitterness. He cannot fail us, and His Holy Spirit would abide with us and strengthen us."

But Prue could not rise to these heights. Even now she trembled so that Faith dreaded Benjamin would notice it, and *had they not been told to hide all signs of fear from him?*

He seemed to quiet down for a while, though nothing made Yap less fussy ; and the tea came in, and they took their places at table.

But Benjamin never touched the food set before him. He was listening all the while, his head raised, his eyes opened wide.

Then he got up all at once, and, parrot-like, repeated the old words : "She is asleep among the daisies. Hush ! thee will awake her—hush !"

Even Faith felt a chill shudder run through her veins.

Truly this was some wondrous new and strange delusion, and whence came it ?

Awhile the simple creature stood turning his head from side to side, Yap watching him in an agony of impatience.

"She will be cold," he said ; "cold—it will grow dark—she will be cold."

He stole a-tiptoe to the sofa, lifted a little white netted shawl that lay there by chance, hugged it to his bosom, and stole from the room, Yap following, distancing him and rushing madly down the drive.

The sisters looked at one another, rose at the same moment, and passed out into the lovely dying light of the summer eventide.

Down the grassy way, on to the tall gate-posts, hoping against hope that he would return and meet them, hand-in-hand, for consolation, like two troubled children, they took their way, and then——

Was Brother Benjamin so very mad as people said ? Any-way, there was "method in his madness."

For, all among the daisies, just inside the gate-way, lay a prone figure dressed all in black, while beside her knelt Benjamin ; her head had fallen back upon his knee, the black bonnet had dropped to the ground, and the glory of a ruddy coronal of bright brown hair was caught by the dying radiance of the sunset, that lit up the deathly pallor of a weary woman's face.

Yap was wildly licking the lifeless hand that hung by her side, only ceasing to look yearningly up into Faith's face for help.

In a moment they were kneeling about her on the green tangle.

Friend Faith touched her face, and spoke, bending low to her.

"Friend," she said, "friend, what aileth thee? Canst thou not speak and tell us?"

At that the woman opened her eyes, brown and lustrous, but with a strange filmy look, as if they saw not what they looked upon. She pressed her hand to her brow and gazed with a puzzled stare upon the group around her.

"I am tired," she said, "I have lost my way; I came by the bridge; the field of poppies looked red in the sun;—and the little bird came down to the stone to drink . . . such a little, little bird . . . but the hill is too steep—I cannot reach the church; I hear the bells, but they sound very far away . . ."

CIIAPTER XXII.

A LITTLE LIFE.

“SURE an’ it’s a drop o’ the cratur would put new life into her. She’s too wake entoirely—that’s what ails her,” said Biddy.

But there was no such thing as a “drop o’ the cratur” to be found within the walls of Dromore, and there was the strange lady who had truly been found “asleep among the daisies,” lying all along on the shiny horsehair sofa without sense or motion, Friend Faith laving her poor white face with spring water, Prue standing by in sore perplexity, and Friend Benjamin carrying on a hushed yet agitated conversation with Yap, whom he had caught, and was holding on to, as a sort of anchor in a storm-tossed time.

Everyone was very glad that Biddy had appeared upon the scene ; for the ladies of Dromore found themselves placed in a new and most trying position, with all the traditions of their quiet lives of daily routine scattered to the winds.

Who could have foreseen an hour ago that such a break in the every-day existence at Dromore would come about ?

And what were they to do ?

It appeared as if their involuntary guest were about to revive when they found her by the gateway, for though her speech was rambling, she had been able to rise with the help of kindly arms, and had walked, with a good deal of assistance truly, yet cleverly enough, up the grass-grown drive, and into the pleasant dwelling room.

She had a strangely dazed and bewildered look about

her, but smiled as Friend Benjamin took her hand, and led her, as one might lead a little child, across the threshold of Dromore.

"Verily, thou art ill," said Friend Faith, leading her to the sofa ; "thou must rest awhile."

It was to be a long, long rest ; for even as she answered, "I have walked too far, and the hill is steep. You can see the church up against the sky—the bells sound so sweet—they are ringing now," their strange guest lay gently back and fell once more into a deathly swoon ; a swoon so like death, that Prue wrung her hands in helpless bewilderment, and Benjamin, whispering to his chief friend and counsellor, said with an awed kind of whimper :

"It is Our Lady, our Lady of Sorrows ; the sorrows have killed her, they have pierced her heart. Yap, listen ! We must get some flowers, pretty and sweet, to strew above her, and a little lamp to burn upon her grave, and shine like a star out in the dark, dark night. Thee knowest, Yap ?—like those in the graveyard by the sea."

In their wide wanderings together, these two, master and dog, had seen strange things, and made acquaintance, as the saying goes, with strange bedfellows. Benjamin's feeble mind had picked up and held on to various quirks and fancies, and was now an incongruous mass of ideas, disjointed yet vivid, in many ways reflecting the beliefs and superstitions of the simple peasantry of the neighbouring village. No one ever contradicted friend Benjamin, for contradiction was a thing that drove him to frenzy ; a fact long since fully recognised by the people round about Dromore ; so that no freer, more uncontrolled creature could exist than the man with the face of a child, and—so said the folks—the heart of an angel. He came and he went, he was welcome everywhere. He wandered into the ever open churches, he imitated the gestures of the worshippers, he picked up the phrases and shibboleths of a faith as absolutely opposed to Quakerism as a *faith could be*, and no one had a fault to find, or a carping word to say.

He was a "natural"; he was under the special care of Heaven; to molest him in any way was to make yourself an equal reprobate with the deceiver of the dying or the robber of the dead.

When Miles O'Flanagan's child that was subject to fits was, by the advice of a most cunning and knowledgeable personage, laid in a gravel-pit with its feet towards the rising sun, and four Paternosters said at its head and four Glorias at either hand, when much good resulted, it was openly stated that nothing contributed to the efficacy of the treatment more than the fact that "the gintleman" of Dromore gravely assisted at the function.

Indeed Friend Benjamin had taken the deepest interest in it all, muttering and gesticulating with the best. That he was subsequently found to be under the impression that he had been assisting at a funeral did not detract from the general satisfaction in the least. It only proved how truly "simple" he was, and the bunches of grass and wild flowers that he brought to strew upon the supposed corpse were cherished as sacred relics.

So now when Biddy heard him address the poor creature who lay in their midst all white and stirless as our Lady of Sorrows, she crossed herself with that celerity and ease that none but your true-bred Catholic ever attains to, and stored up this new instance of a natural's occult sayings to edify her belongings with presently.

Meanwhile, faithful Biddy's suggestion as to that "drop o' the cratur" that was not forthcoming fell to the ground. There could, of course, have been no better or wiser suggestion, only the means to carry it out were lacking, and, there being no better substitutes, cold water from the little spring that tinkled so musically at the bottom of the garden, and a bottle of pungent salts—a relic of Prue's indisposition—had to do duty for what was lacking. Nature doubtless assisted, for she is the most skilled and cunning of physicians, and at last the stranger opened her eyes and looked up at *Friend Faith*.

That struggling back to consciousness is a terrible process, as all of us who have passed through it know full well. It is sometimes hard to be duly grateful to those who drag us back to life through such a painful process, and we would fain entreat them to let us float away again into that cloudland where erstwhile we lay as a child asleep on the mother's lap.

"Glory be to God!" cried Biddy, down on her knees in a trice; "she's wakin'; in a bit she'll be after spakin'! Praise be to the Blessed Saints!"

"Get up, Biddy," said Friend Faith, in a matter-of-fact voice that contrasted oddly enough with the emotional accents of the Irishwoman; "go into the kitchen and fetch a cup of hot broth from the pot."

They were very poor these ladies of Dromore, but the world—especially the world around them—held those who were poorer still.

The small remnant left from their own store was itself stored up, and no wayfarer who came to the door of the crazy porch to beg for "a sup and a bit" was allowed to leave unsatisfied.

Hence the stranger who had fallen at their very gates came in for a share of this little charity; and the warm soup seemed to act as well as any "drop o' the cratur" that ever was distilled.

A faint tinge of colour came to the fair, pale cheek; a soft light to the heavy eyes.

"I do not know who you are," said Kate (in sorry plight, it must be confessed, and hardly entitled to the name of "Bonnie" any more), "but you are very kind—very good to me.

"We are friends," said Friend Faith.

Kate looked from one to the other of the kindly capped faces, and then across to poor Benjamin, who in his absence of mind had somehow wrapped Yap round in the small netted shawl he had taken possession of before to shield Kate from

the cold of the coming night, and was holding the little dog in his arms like a baby.

"*He* was my first friend," she said, with a tiny, sad little smile. "I felt myself falling, and through the mist I saw him coming to me."

At this Benjamin returned to his old refrain.

"She was asleep among the daisies, wasn't she, Yap? We saw her, didn't we, my lad? Our Lady of Sorrows was asleep among the daisies."

A flush stole up to the neat parting of Prue's hair. She was at all times ultra-sensitive about her brother's affliction, and now what would the stranger think?

But the words uttered in Benjamin's high-pitched piping voice met with a response little expected.

"You are quite right," said Kate, as the tears started and fell; "quite—quite right. That name suits me well—very, very well."

Then, with a startled look round the unfamiliar room, she made an effort to rise from the couch, but Friend Faith's firm hand pressed her gently back.

"Nay," she said; "thou art not rested enough to rise yet awhile. Take some more of the soup and sop a bit of bread in it; methinks thou hast fasted over long."

"Indeed I have, and I have lost all my things. I had a bag, and I do not know where it is gone, but my money is safe here," laying her hand upon her bosom; "all this must seem very strange to you, I know, but I cannot well say more."

"Thou hast no need to," said Faith Worthy; "we are not of those who seek to look into that which is hidden. Thou art sick and weary; we do but wish to succour thee."

"I came to Ireland to seek out a friend," went on Kate, embarrassed by the position in which she found herself, and touched by the delicacy and tenderness of her new friends; "I thought—nay, I was sure—she was living in Dublin, but I found the house empty, dark, and desolate.

Then I wandered about I know not where, and everything round me seemed to grow dim and misty—my strength failed me. I——” (here she passed her hand across her brow, and gave a long, shuddering sigh) “I fancied I was at Low Cross and had lost my way. Even now the mist seems closing in upon me once again; your kind faces are all dim and indistinct; your voices seem to reach me from somewhere far away. Can I stay here for a night’s rest? I am very lonely and desolate; I will not give you much trouble. Do not turn me out until the night is passed. Last night the way was so dark and long; the hill to the church is steep, but heaven is nearer when you reach the summit; you can see the hills purple and gold, and the green, green wolds stretched out at your feet. I shall get there presently, but just now I am too tired; indeed I am. . . .”

Friend Faith was kneeling by the couch, and had her arm beneath the drooping head.

She recognised that the enfeebled body was acting on the mind, that the wandering thoughts were all disjointed, “like sweet bells jangled out of tune”; not Benjamin himself at the time of his worst spells could be more helpless, more wholly thrown upon their tender mercies than this poor girl—for she was little more—struck down in the midst of her weary wanderings.

What those wanderings might mean, what strange and pitiful story might underlie this wonderful rent in the even tenor of their own peaceful, and uneventful lives, Faith Worthy never once stopped to question. If it were good that she should know of these things, why, then the knowledge would be given her. If not, she was content to leave the mystery unsolved, to work in the darkness, so long as that work meant the succouring of the unfortunate, the giving of help and comfort where both were needed.

She would have told you that when the Divine Man, Christ Jesus, walked this earth of ours, and came upon those who were sick and afflicted, we have no record that He asked

them any questions as to their life or sorrows ; we have no record that He stayed to assure Himself they were worthy objects of His magnificence of compassion : rather He healed them even in passing—healed them, as it were, in the same moment that He became aware of their necessities.

In her, therefore—humbly treading in the Saviour's footsteps—was no curiosity, no longing to spy out sin, and so find an excuse to deny succour. The recipient of her charity was answerable to God, not to her ; she had only her own plain duty to do—that duty to fall away from which would be the deadliest of sins against the light that shines from the face beneath the Crown of Thorns.

It seemed as if poor bewildered Kate understood the silent assurance of that protecting and supporting arm that had been slipped beneath her head.

She lay back against it trustfully, and Prue fanned her weary face with a great palm-leaf fan, and found the while a secret pleasure in such an exciting and romantic episode as the advent of a stranger into their midst. For Prue's heart was young still, and the romance that had never had full vent lay latent there, ready to start into life. She was sure—very, very sure, though she would not have whispered such a fancy to her sister Faith—that quite a wonderful story would come to light one of these days about this Lady of Sorrows, whom Benjamin had found "asleep among the daisies." Sister Faith was very strict about the books that were read at Dromore ; but Prue was of a mind to think, that seeing a romance acted before your very eyes, and beneath your very roof, was to be preferred to reading the most thrilling story in a book. All at once a look of fear and pain passed over the face of the stranger. She caught Biddy's hand and held it tight.

Biddy, who had drawn near, was watching the lady with a new and startled intentness, and at last, after many muttered invocations to many saints, and various uprisings of hands and eyes, she bent forward to whisper in Friend Faith's ear.

Then her earnestness and fear getting the better of her, Biddy flung caution to the winds.

"For the love of God," she said, twisting her apron into a rope and wringing it hard, "get her up the stairs and settled in her bed. I'll be afther seeking the 'wise woman' the while—the saints be good to the lot of us this night!"

Friend Faith unhooked the bunch of keys from her girdle, and handed them to Prue.

"Go," she said, "get clean linen from the press, and settle my bed ready for her, and, Biddy, do thou hasten on thy errand."

Twisting the corner of her shawl over her tousled head, Biddy was off like the arrow from the bow, and in wondrous short time Prue had all in readiness in the chamber above, and, between them, Friend Faith and she had roused the stranger from the cloud of stupor that seemed to be wrapping her round once more, and led her by easy stages up the wide and shallow stairs, undressed her with tender, helpful hands, and laid her to rest in the lavender-scented room, where all was so poor, yet all so shiningly white and clean.

The blind was lowered, a slender candle burned upon the mantel, and Friend Faith had taken up her post as watcher by the bed, when Prue, hovering near, raised the left hand that lay so lifeless and inert upon the knitted coverlet.

There on the slim white finger was the plain golden circlet. Friend Faith gently covered both ring and hand in her own.

"If it had not been so she would only have needed our help and compassion the more, thee knows."

Prue blushed as hotly as though it had been her own fair name and fame under discussion. It was no new thing to her to feel both worldly and worldly-wise before the sublime simplicity of the other's large-hearted charity.

It was not long before Biddy was back, accompanied by an individual not unlike herself multiplied by four—as kindly, as full of sympathy, as ready with devotional appeals to all the saints of the calendar, and quite as incongruous in that household of Friends.

Towards midnight Prue came stealing down the stairs to Benjamin keeping solitary vigil with Yap curled up at his feet, and told him that the lady was ill—very ill—and Yap must not be allowed to bark, no matter what cats or other vermin made eerie rustlings in the shrubberies.

Prue was followed by her sister Faith, bearing in her hand a purse.

Friend Faith looked grave indeed, so grave that neither of the others cared to speak to her.

She opened the clasp of the purse, took out a roll of notes and some gold, counted each note thus : “One, two, three, four, five,” each for twenty pounds ; then the sovereigns, ten in all ; opened her desk, placed the money in safe custody, and turned the key upon it : all this being done in silence, but so that all there should see.

Benjamin gave such a start at the sight of so much money that Yap made preparations to bark, and had to be promptly smothered. He knew that those rustling bits of paper and small yellow coins meant many, many shillings. He realised that when shillings were few in the little money-box after the day’s business, food was scant and coarse at Dromore ; and visions of mighty feasts—to which he had already resolved to bid all his surrounding friends, including Miles O’Flanagan and his numerous family—would result from this marvellous store. But Benjamin “gave his thoughts no tongue.”

There was that in Faith’s white face that held him silent.

It was not fear ; it may indeed be questioned whether the chastened soul that looked through those calm and steadfast eyes knew what fear was. It was rather a resolute acceptance of some trial that seemed to be drawing near, a looking earnestly towards that heaven from which some stroke of fate was imminent.

Friend Faith moved across the dim room in silence ; seated herself by the uncurtained window, whence the star-gemmed sky showed so gloriously, folded her hands, the one in the other, in her lap, and became as motionless as any statue.

"She is talking to the stars," whispered Benjamin to Prue, with a face of great awe.

Then, as he saw a tear trickling down her cheek, he put up his hand to wipe it away.

"Is Our Lady dead?" he said shuddering. "Has the sorrow pierced her heart? We will bury Our Lady of Sorrows under the daisies; we will set roses on her breast."

How strange is the power and the strength of the cords of human sympathy!

A few hours ago, and these two dear sisters had not known of this stranger's existence, and now, while she waged the battle between life and death, the one watched for her, the other wept.

It was a night never to be forgotten in the annals of Dromore.

Long after Benjamin lay sleeping the childlike sleep of the irresponsible, with Yap curled up at his feet, these two faithful souls kept vigil in the silence.

The stars glowed and paled; the sky grew from purple to grey, and from grey to faintest rose; the birds stirred and twittered in the branches; a little breeze, the harbinger of the sun, rustled the leaves of the ivy and the sprays of jasmine that framed the windows; and just as the edge of the ball of gold came up from the east, and sent a level ray right into the heart of the world, to awaken the sleepers and tell of the birth of a new day; just as Prue had called to mind two lines that seem to gather up all the beauty and brightness of sunrise:

" 'Tis the morning—
'Twas the night,"

Biddy came in all smiles and tears, like the climate of her native land, and told the watchers that a little life was born into the world—that the stranger lady lay in the room *above*, white and wan, yet a loving, rejoicing mother, with her *baby on her breast*.

Thus, in strange and unpretending fashion, came into the heritage of life John Granger's son.

Such a little, little son !

A wee face like a doll's, with rings of silken hair above each temple ; a little life called into being before its time —called too soon into a world that is full of trial even to the strongest ; a frail and fragile idol for a woman to garner up her heart upon—a tiny baby with big eyes set in its little face ; eyes so darkly grey they shone like a mountain tarn with the sun on it—John's eyes ; the eyes that had won all a girl's heart in the old days that were past : the happy days before misunderstandings and cruel estrangements came about, turning what was once so sweet into bitterness. To Kate the sight of those baby-eyes was like meeting with one she had long parted from.

All through the long hours of that night of pain and unrest she had lain in a deep and at times unconscious stupor ; but with the light of morning this cloud passed, and as the child was laid in her arms, and she saw John's eyes looking up at her from the sweet wee face, she caught it and held it, crying, as she fondled it with tears :

“ Oh, baby ! baby ! you have come to comfort me—to look at me with your father's eyes ! ”

Upon which the “ wise woman ” snatched the babe away, hushing it up to her ample breast, and covering the little head with her hand as though to shield it from some threatened ill.

“ And it's greetin' over a new-born child ye are,” she said ; “ would ye be afther bringing bad cess to it all the days of its life ? Hush, then, alanna ! 'twas no tears above ye, but just the dew o' the mornin' fallin' from the sky to bless ye ! ”

CHAPTER XXIII.

“MATER DOLOROSA.”

MANY and varied were the rumours that floated round about Dromore concerning the “lodger” the ladies were now entertaining.

Once set agoing, hearsay blows as briskly as a wind from the sea ; and it is to be feared that Biddy had given her imagination wings to fly both high and far, so that the young mother and the little child became the centre of interest in every peasant home in Green Dales. Biddy hinted at this, and hinted at that, and the supposed rank of the lady rose from that of the wife of a “real gentleman entirely” to that of a prospective Prince. In the latter case public sympathy was inclined to centre upon the small—very small—baby that was constantly seen taking an airing in the somewhat tangled and out-at-elbows grounds of Dromore, and for whose blood (so this same rumour said) the Sassenach cruelly thirsted. Nobody attempted to account for this remarkable conduct upon the part of the Sassenach, but everyone whispered to everyone else that it was cruel hard on the little one—“the cratur!” and might the Blessed Virgin herself watch over him, and then no manner of harm would befall him.

So much for the humbler inhabitants of Green Dales. The more pretentious hardly entertained such romantic ideas, but they were of the opinion that some mystery surrounded “Mrs. Sinclair,” and that Friend Faith and Friend Prue were discreet in their silence. They were taken by the stranger’s

grace and beauty, and caught by her trick of manner ; by that intangible and irresistible charm of look and voice that so few could resist.

There was a quaintness verging upon the humorous in the way that Kate became fitted with that name—Mrs. Sinclair. Friend Faith's reply to her when she christened herself with it was characteristic.

"Well, friend, we will call thee Mrs. Sinclair," and Kate felt as though all her heart and life were laid bare before the calm, observant eyes of the speaker.

She pressed her hands one in the other, moving her head restlessly from side to side, as you may see an animal do when it wants to escape and knows the longing vain.

"I have had great trouble," she said, haltingly, and speaking as though the truth were being drawn from her unwillingly, as by a mesmerist ; "I made a good deal of the trouble for myself ; I can see that now ; but it was not any the less hard to bear—not any. I am going on a long voyage, to find the friend whom I missed at Dublin. She will not turn her back upon me ; she will help me. All this must seem very strange to you ; but bear with me."

"Nay, there is no burden in thee to bear," replied the other ; "we love to look upon thee, and to have thee in our midst. If it were God's will that thou shouldst rest here awhile we should be glad at heart ; and, for the little one, it is like sunshine to us. Our lives have never held such a treasure before—it is a wonder to us, and Benjamin so loves it that he hath never wandered from us since it came."

"Then I may stay a while," said Kate, her natural impetuosity, restrained by Friend Faith's calm reserve, kept under as by the steady pressure of a hand ; "oh, I long to stay ! Dromore seems like a new world—a world very far away from the world that—"

"Hush, my daughter !" said the elder woman. "I have asked thee not as to thy sorrow or thy desolation—'the heart knoweth its own bitterness'—nor would I try to stir

the deep waters ; rather would I counsel thee to lay bare thine heart to One who can best comfort thee and guide thee in the way whither thou shouldst go. I do entreat Him for thee daily, and will do so continually ; but do not—led on by a too impulsive heart—say to me that which peradventure in a time to come thou might wish unsaid. Rest here as thou wilt ; none shall molest thee, none shall question thee. Few are the echoes from the world beyond that reach Dromore, and thou mayest find the quiet around thee healing. It may be that no long journey over seas is before thee ; it may be the Lord's will, which shall presently be shown, that thou shouldst return upon the way that thou hast come. Nay, speak not, I pray thee. Thou art safe and cherished here—thee and thy babe. Hadst thou been poor thou shouldst have shared our poverty. Things being as they are, I have let thee join thy worldly go odsto ours as much as I count to be just ; therefore thou canst feel thyself no burden—nay verily, thou art a help to us, and a brightness in our midst ; and I think the Lord hath greatly blessed thy presence among us, and our daily store hath much increased."

A tear stole slowly down poor Kate's pale cheek as she listened, and yet it was passing sweet to her to know that she had been some help and comfort to those who had dealt lovingly and generously by her. She knew well that the same help, the same infinite charity, would have been extended to any shivering wretch who had chanced to fail and fall on the threshold of the old, mildewed, poverty-stricken manor that was yet a home where that light of Divine love, which is in truth the light of the world, shone with still and clear fulgence. Yet she was not, for this reason, the less deeply grateful for the succour given to herself in her hour of sore need.

The simple courage with which the two dear sisters met the trials that had come upon them filled her with admiration. *It was to her—reared in all the luxury that easy competence*

brings with it—a new experience, and one of her chief pleasures was to take delighted Biddy into her confidence, and procure some unlooked-for offering for the home that sheltered her. The carrier grew quite excited, and displayed much curiosity as to the size and number of the parcels that arrived at Dromore from the great city of Dublin ; and Biddy reeled off to him such legends as to the mysterious stranger sojourning within their gates, that he might have been seen driving off in his great hooded van, with mouth puckered up in a perpetual whistle, while he scratched his head in a maze of vast perplexity.

Dainty garments for the tiny boy that was worshipped by the whole household—from Friend Faith, with her stately, tender interest in him, to Yap, who barked himself all sideways, till he looked like a dog in a high wind, every time he saw the long, slender bundle of white being carried out into the warm breezy sunshine—; a wonderful chair for Prue, so cunningly adjusted that it held you and clasped you like the arms of a friend ; a book of pictured animals, such as the simple soul of Friend Benjamin had never dreamt of ; a silver collar for Yap ; and for Biddy a dress-length of the chapest green, over which the faithful creature said a whole rosary of prayers, and shed tears of agitated joy.

For Friend Faith—what ?

Nothing as yet.

Kate had turned and turned over in her mind the problem of some possible offering for Faith Worthy, and found no solution ready.

It seemed something like sacrilege to think of offering her any mundane gift. The gifts that rise from the heart like sweet-smelling incense seemed more appropriate—love, reverence, gratitude, of these Kate gave no stint. The sleeping-chamber given up to her so naturally from the first ; the gentle service of daily ministrations ; the ever-watchful care over mother and child : how could such things be repaid, save by that homage of the spirit that is at once *intangible, yet precious ?*

Kate had quickly become conscious that she was dwelling with one whose soul was steeped in that deep, indwelling light that sees in all things—sorrows and trials, as well as blessings and joys—the infinite love of God.

The marvellous majestic silence of the Quaker worship ; the ceaseless, patient waiting upon God ; the willing following, absolutely blindfold, along the path of life, over the thorns and even the red-hot ploughshares that might lie in the way; simply because it was His hand that led, His voice that called to follow on—all this grew upon her, smiting her with a sense of wrong and shame on her own part ; smiting her as the blessed palms of the righteous smite, in love as well as warning. She saw no knee bent, no head bowed, no book opened, yet she lived in a world of prayer and close communion with God that she felt, as we feel the atmosphere that surrounds us.

Outwardly Kate's life at this strange period of her experiences was calm, quiet, useful to those about her. She often took her turn at the “table” : customers coming thick and fast. She herself purchased the little pink-edged hood we wot of, and forthwith “baby”—there being, of course, no other baby in the world, that little sufficed—appeared in it as he took his walks abroad, and Benjamin's shrill, cackling laughter greeted the procession, you may be sure.

Never had Benjamin been so happy as since our Lady of Sorrows came straight from heaven to take up her abode at Dromore. His simple faith in the supernatural character of her appearance among them was touching to witness. He would gather the prettiest blossoms from the tangle of greenery that called itself a garden, and scatter them before her as she walked. He would bind the roses into posies, and set them one on either side of her place at table, singing to himself—in a faint shrill treble, like no other voice, yet tuneful too—the pretty swinging litanies that he had heard in the little chapel by the sea, and whose melody his ear had caught and held. Week after week passed away, and there

was no sign of those restless, roaming spells of his that made Faith's cheek grow white, and Prue's eyes full of restless fear. Not, be it understood, that the sisters ever spoke of those times of trial to Mrs. Sinclair; indeed, it touched her to the heart to note how tender they were over this brother of theirs, how they treated him exactly as though he were just like the rest of the world, yet what covert watch they kept upon him, restless if he were too long absent, happy if he seemed content and quiet. He knew no weariness in watching Kate and the child. He would take his stand at the foot of the wide uncarpeted stairs of a morning, and so wait her coming, looking up at her with his great wide eyes, and calling to his sisters, waiting in the sunlit parlour where the kettle hissed on the hob:

"She is coming—our Lady is coming!"

Kate, looking down and seeing the child-face between the lint-white locks that fell on either side, the little dog with its paws on the lowmost step, and its tail all in a flutter, felt their simple love to be a very precious offering. She was schooling herself to try and live in the present and turn her eyes away resolutely from the past. All her mental attitude seemed to have become one of waiting. She could not have told you what she was waiting for. If you had said that, unconsciously to herself, she was waiting and listening for some voice—whose voice?—to call from out the world she had deserted, "Come back! Come back! I cannot live without you!" she would have cast aside the idea with scorn.

Nay, she could not be so weak.

Had she not cast them all aside of her own free will, and elected to brave the world—a new world in which no one could reproach her for having married a man to his own undoing; in which there would be no Aunt Libbie to stab her with pin-pricks day by day, and hour by hour—and make herself a habitation and a name by her own unaided exertions? Had she resolved thus, thus acted, wrenching

herself away from what was dearer than life itself—from the touch of a man's hand that thrilled her through and through, from the sound of a man's voice that filled her ears with music—a music that must be for ever silent until she heard that tender, precious voice again? Had she gone through this Gehenna, and was she now to faint and fail—to draw back—to stultify her former resolutions?

True, at times her thoughts rushed with impassioned flight towards the husband she had deserted. Never, in her saddest moments of rebellion against the troubles that had gathered and surged about her, had Kate for one moment failed to recognise the cruel truth—that with John all romance, all passion, all intensity of devotion must pass from her life.

Had she loved him less, she ne'er had left him. The horror of the thought that his love for her might fade, because of all the conflicting influences that had come into his life with her, had been one of the whips to scourge her into the erring course she had followed. Better he should mourn her as lost—as dead; better he should look back and think of her sitting at his knee with the rose at her throat, and her cheek against his hand; better he should remember her thus, and call to mind the passionate cry: “Sweetheart—oh, my sweetheart!” than come to realise more and more the estrangements and difficulties that had arisen from their marriage, and thus cease to love her with the passion and the tenderness that alone could satisfy her.

Yet doubts of herself were not wanting. They would often intrude their ugly faces, after the manner of their kind, when they were least wanted.

She had been miserable, tortured, misconstrued, intolerant of the suffering that came upon her daily, and she had fled from the babel of it all, stopping the ears of her mind lest she should hear a pleading voice calling to her through the distance. Every line of the letter she had written to John seemed as though traced for ever on her brain in letters of fire.

"When you read this I shall have passed out of your life. They tell me I should never by rights have been a part of it, and that you, my husband, feel this to be so. You are dearer to me now this moment than ever before; always believe this; let no one—no one—ever make you think otherwise. Do not be afraid for me; I am not afraid for myself. I shall not be quite lonely, for I shall have our child. Perhaps God will be merciful to me, and it will have your eyes—your dear, dear eyes that I have seen watching me so often. There is much more that I wanted to say, but I cannot remember—only this: if you hear the poor woman we have listened to so often, singing out in the night, and if she sings, 'Good-bye, sweetheart, good-bye,' fancy, dear love of mine, that it is Kate's voice singing to you, Kate's love calling to you."

That was all.

How often since had she thought how much, much more there might have been? Lying wide-eyed through the night, her baby breathing soft and low beside her, its little velvet hand within her breast, Kate would watch and weep, even until the pale finger of dawn traced the pattern of the window in the wall, and a new day—a day silent for lack of a loved voice, barren for lack of the craved-for touch of hand and lip—was born.

In these long nights of watching what self-questionings would arise?

What of the overmastering impulse that had hurried her on, driven her forth into the wide, wide world, away, away from the surroundings that pressed her so hard, that stifled her, that had grown intolerable? Whence came that rush and passion of rebellion?

What was the influence that urged her on to take her life into her hands once more, and shape it better to her liking?

Was it not an impulse—masquerade as it might under other name—born of self?

Let her tear “the face-cloth from its face”; let her stare close into its wide-distended eyes, and hard-compressed lips.

Was it not the old undisciplined spirit that the voice of the faithful dead had warned her against so often?

Was it not a failure—a dismal, gruesome failure—rather than an heroic or self-sacrificing action?

How John must have suffered! Doubtless by this time Aunt Cynthia would be in England. Poor Aunt Cynthia! it would take them hours and hours to explain to her that it was even possible a wife should leave her husband.

Then, Will—how the bright face would be overcast, the bonnie blue eyes all dimmed with tears!

And far away, up in the stern north, a mother would mourn her son’s deserted home—his desolate hearth.

Ah me! that was the hardest thought of all the sweet pale face upon the pillow, and Humbie: Humbie would be sure to be near at such a time of wonderment and pain—Humbie bending over her. All the homestead would be hushed and still. There would be “no sound of violins”; the twins would be linked arm-in-arm; they would go softly, whisper fearfully. Jack would look in the faces of his friends wistfully, and as though he longed for the gift of speech. The girls would go down to the gate with James Dodd, and the three would speak low the one to the other.

And the old motto would show dark in the moonlight: “God’s Providence is My Inheritance.”

There is no limit to that claim upon the great Father. “My” stands for the whole wide world: for every soul, white or black, soiled or pure, sinful or saintly, in it.

No hand can be stretched forth in vain; but, being stretched forth and clasped, then must the guidance of the Father be followed.

Had not Kate rather wrenched her hand away from the Divine hold, and staggered out into the darkness—she knew not whither?

After one of these long nights of weary thought and vigil,

during which Kate shed tears enough over her babe to bring bad luck indeed to it all the days of its life, if what the wise woman said was true, the morning ushered in one of the most golden days that summer ever gave the world. Summer was now in the prime of her prime, and it seemed as though the birds were silent, not so much because the time of singing was past, as because they were awed into stillness by the perfection of the beauty that surrounded them.

Roses ran riot everywhere in that sweet, neglected garden—roses white and roses red, roses that were each a golden chalice with a glowing amber heart the colour of a sunset sky; roses that swung in the gentle, balmy air, happy acrobats on leaf-wreathed, slender boughs; roses that grew in natural posies, with pink-tipped up-folded little buds for a centre-piece; cabbage-roses, old-fashioned, pink-faced, round like a dairy-maid's, and giving forth such sweet breath that the very bees gathering their store of honey seemed to linger on their way.

The poverty and decay that had left such cruel traces about the old house showed less in the ripe, rich summer-time than in autumn or winter. The very luxuriance born of neglect gave an idea of a plenty that, as it were, bubbled over, and ran riot in leaf and flower. The confused tangle of briar and brushwood, weed and flower, had a beauty of its own, for even the very weeds grew bold and thrust up blossoms into the sunshine, showing themselves off cheek by jowl with the blue spires of the lupin, and the Canterbury bells.

Kate, sitting out on the seat beneath the shadow of the cedar, watching Miss Prue arranging the pretty woollen wares in as tempting a manner as possible, was struck anew by the wild, unfettered beauty around her. The scented air buffeted her face, the sunshine from above filtered through the boughs and made a dainty tessellated pavement of green and gold at her feet; roses nodded so near her hand they seemed begging to be gathered and set in her breast.

Friend Faith came out from under the crazy porch, a quaintly pleasing figure in her drab robe and dazzlingly white shawl, with the Quaker cap clipping round the quiet serenity of her face.

A silent woman, save on rare occasions of much-stirred feeling, she laid her hand on Kate's shoulder by way of greeting, letting her gentle eyes wander round the sunshine-bathed garden, with its gay, sweet store of flowers, and its many-tinted greenery.

Kate followed, and answered the look that said so much more than many words from another.

"It is one of God's own days," she said, her changed and saddened face lit up by a happy smile; "one of God's own days!"

The answer came, quietly enough uttered, yet each word as incisive as if cut with a knife.

"All the days are God's days, my daughter, the cloudy ones as well as the bright ones, just as all our times are in His hand; the time of sorrow no less than the time of joy and gladness."

It seemed as though some sudden pain, that yet brought with it light and healing, struck right to Kate's heart.

Yes, she had forgotten that the sad days were God's gift as well as the glad ones. She had forgotten that, and in her haste and madness had thrust them from her, and so fled.

Friend Benjamin, sent to bid her come to breakfast, surprised a tear upon her cheek.

"You are always sad," he said, "Our Lady of Sorrows."

"Yes," she cried, with a little strangled sob, "that name suits me best of all, dear Friend!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

"IS IT THE DAWN BREAKING?"

THE coming of Mrs. Sinclair into the midst of the Dromore home circle was to Friend Benjamin a truly stupendous event. It took so much thinking over that the simple creature never knew a weary or unoccupied hour, and was for ever talking to Yap upon the subject, the little dog listening as though he fully entered into and understood every word.

The coming of the babe was a wonder too, a sort of miracle, and really necessitated the gravest consideration.

"You and I must be very careful," said Friend Benjamin to Yap, who, with one ear up and one down, listened intently—"quite a different man, and quite a different dog. It would never do for me to roam the woods all night talking to the stars when they peep through the green, because I might be wanted, and must always be at hand, and as the little kid grows older he'll want a store of paper animals to amuse him, you know; so idleness cannot be allowed. As for you, no rushing about after starlings or barking at the milkman must be even thought of. You must become a graver and wiser dog than you have ever been yet, and we must both learn to go about softly—softly—softly, so that a leaf will not rustle, for to wake a child suddenly will give the demons power over it. Biddy says so, and she knows. But if you see a butterfly fluttering near our lady and the child you may chase it away, for butterflies are the souls of the departed, and may work harm to the living. Once a butterfly came in through the open window when the baby was asleep, and

Biddy was afraid, and crossed herself—once—twice—thrice, and the soul flew away. Yap, I wonder where they fly to? It looks too high to the blue sky that is above us."

Seeing his master look up, Yap looked up too, and, fondly imagining his attention was being directed to some possible prey, growled in his little stomach, and stamped upon the grass.

Friend Benjamin took no heed, for a lark had risen from the sod, and was rising, rising, rising, borne upwards, or so it seemed, by the rush and ecstasy of its own song.

"That little bird must be a holy soul, and has flown straight to heaven," said the poor "natural." "See, it has passed the white cloud, where the angels sit and sing. Yap, Yap! you would not bark at a holy soul!"

For Yap, showing but little of the spirit of reverence, it must be confessed, had given a sharp yelp, and had to have his nose smothered against the breast of his master's coat.

Another of Benjamin's fancies at this time resulted in a quaint enough interview between himself and the round-faced priest of the little church of Our Lady.

That worthy man was contemplating, with no small satisfaction, a brand-new Virgin and Child of startlingly florid colouring lately presented by some pious soul to a side altar. His fat hand gently patted his own folded arm, as a sort of reverent applause and mark of satisfaction. He stood with his head on one side, and a rather fatuous smile upon his smooth-shaven face. Himself one of the people, he had all the love of bright colours so characteristic of the Irish peasantry, and the statue, with its crimson robe, crown of yellow stars, and babe all dressed in blue, pleased him well.

So absorbed was he in the glory of this new addition to the completeness of his chapel, he heard not a patterning step along the aisle, and gave quite a jump when a high-pitched voice said close to his ear:

"We have a better one than that at home. Ours moves

and speaks, and the baby is twice as beautiful—oh, many, many times as beautiful! I think there never was so sweet a child. When he is asleep he smiles, and then we know the angels are whispering to him. He can hear them, though he cannot see them; but Biddy thinks she heard the rustling of wings the other night."

"Biddy is a good girl—a good girl," said the Father, smiling upon Benjamin's earnest child-face. "She never misses mass nor benediction, nor fails in her duty. The saints watch over her!"

"Our Lady of Sorrows loves Biddy," said Benjamin simply. The Father crossed himself hurriedly.

"Our Lady of Sorrows!—Friend—what strange talk is this?"

"That is her name," replied the other, with quiet confidence in his own conviction; "I found her asleep among the daisies. She is always sad; there is a tear on her cheek, and a sigh in her breast. Her sorrows have pierced her through and through. 'That is my name,' she said to me—'that is the name I love best of all; Mater—Mater Dolorosa.'

Then some disjointed remembrance of what he had seen and heard in the many chapels he had wandered into in his time came over Friend Benjamin. He folded his hands and bowed his head:

"*Ora pro me! Ora pro me!*"

This gentle creature being from his affliction in a state of "invincible ignorance," the good Father felt it no sin to mutter a blessing over the white bent head.

He bethought him, too, being a kindly soul, as he took his way homeward through the gloaming, of the strange words that had fallen from the natural's lips.

Was there not in very truth some sorrow-laden soul close at hand, some stricken woman seeking sanctuary with the good ladies of Dromore?

Might not the cry "*Ora pro me*" rise from that troubled heart, in passionate entreaty, finding voice, as it were, through the unconscious utterance of the idiot?

Doubtless the woman who had ever "a tear on her cheek and a sigh in her breast" was a heretic, and it was difficult to pray for a heretic unless for the conversion of the same; but the kindly old man struck a sort of bargain with his conscience, and prayed earnestly that night for all who were weary and heavy-laden, all who were desolate and oppressed.

This man's heart, like that of many a man and woman of the same communion I have known, and loved, was wider than his creed, nor could the narrow bonds of bigotry prevent the overflow of the pent-up tenderness of his nature, nor yet the stunted life he led deaden or wither sympathies naturally warm and true.

Be sure Kate was no worse for the good Father's prayer. We are all far the better for such hidden sympathy, and may oftentimes feel the warmth and comfort gathering about our hearts, though we know not whence it comes; we may be strengthened and refreshed in our hour of need in answer to the prayer we know not of. And truly Kate stood sorely in need of help, of comfort, of sustaining power.

At times a gentle light played across her pathway. Her love for her child was a passion—an absorbing, consuming passion of tenderness that had in it much of the element of pain. He was such a fragile thing—so white, so tiny, so unlike all other children!

"Sure an' if he'd croy a bit the more it would be the betther for all parties," Biddy would say. "An' its loikin' I'd be to see him kick out as he walks up me apron after washin'."

He was the quietest of babies, this wee thing with John's dark grey eyes and long dark lashes, and he would start and quiver like an aspen leaf if a door opened sharply, or Biddy clapped her hands.

"Sure an' it's afther havin' the tongue cut out of ye ye'll be, Yap, if ye make the darlint skip out of his blessed skin that way wid your noises," would Biddy say, as the little dog jumped and barked with joy when she appeared in the grass-grown pathway with her precious burden; and Yap

must have understood, for he would put a check upon himself instantly, and walked by her side as demure as a mediæval saint of a dog, fit to be canonised, and put in a stained glass window alongside the immortal Jim Crow.

Like the gentle Mother of old, Kate noted many things, and kept and pondered them in her heart.

Had not her own undisciplined rebellion of spirit, her own discontented girdings against the lines in which she found herself entangled, her sighing and her tears in the night season—had not all these been visited upon the head of this innocent, helpless babe? Was he not born into this world with nerves too highly strung, with delicate shrinking frame, with features white and wan, old before their time? Could she ever look at him without self-reproach? Could she ever forget that her own cowardice, her own pitiful shrinking from trial, had made him what he was: a little atom born under a stranger's roof—born far away from the shelter of a father's arms—that father (ah me, how dearly loved, though so defrauded!) cheated of a father's joy—left in his home all desolate, wifeless, and childless! Ah, let her not think of it, lest madness seize her brain, and in the bosom of the sea that moaned and sobbed beneath the moon she and her child be driven to seek the rest of death! "What so easy as return?" a voice would seem to whisper at her ear, but strangely enough she shrank from the thought with an agony of repulsion.

Most strong natures have a vein of stubborn obstinacy running through them; and to this rule Kate—poor misguided Kate—was no exception. If some appeal could reach her in her quiet nest—if some urgent cry should reach her from the far away—but not else, not else.

She had fled of her own free will; she had doomed herself to spiritual starvation (for what was life else, without the man she loved for ever by her side?), and she would not, having entered into the battle, turn back, and cry: "I am vanquished. My will is but a plaything, and has failed.

me. It hangs limp like a broken rope ; it will not bear me up."

She had thought it best for John as well as for herself that she should fade away out of his life as though she had never been. She was of a mind to think so still ; but, with the love of the child that was his as well as hers, there had come upon her a deeper tenderness towards her husband, a truer appreciation of what his suffering must have been in losing her.

At times she felt afraid of herself, and by way of putting a barrier between that feeble self and the old life she had cast off, she wrote to the friend she had missed just by one fatal day at Dublin, and who was now over seas in beautiful Boston city. This lady had once been her governess, always her friend, always in truth her slave and worshipper.

"She will ask no questions," thought Kate, "she will take me as I am, she will adore baby. Together she and I will work to live, and live to work. By now she knows that I was coming to her, and came just too late. She will never betray me. The moment the thought of her came to me in those dreadful days, I knew I had a sure refuge ready. The mistake as to time was her fault ; she sailed a week sooner than she had told me. She must have passed out of Queenstown Harbour when I was still——"

But here her thoughts glanced aside, as one might shrink away from the touch of a hand upon a wound. It would never do to let herself think of John and that last night—never ! The dear face seen in the disc of the lamplight ; the eyes—those load-stars of her life—watching her as she moved step by step further and further from him. . . .

Such a vision, if dwelt upon, might drive her to God only knew what folly.

Friend Faith's all-observant eyes caught sight of the American letter.

"*Thou wilt not leave us yet awhile,*" she said. "*Baby is not fit to cross the sea ; he must grow somewhat bigger first, and, I fain would hope, stronger.*"

Kate caught her breath.

"He is very small, I know," she said ; "but Biddy says he is healthy—*very* healthy."

"Biddy has kissed the Blarney-stone, thee knows," replied Friend Faith with a smile.

"But he will be strong," said poor Kate, with a sickening flutter at her heart ; "it is only a matter of time?"

"And God's will," said the other. "Thee must not make an idol of thy little one. I well-nigh lost my Prue because I sinned against the Lord in that. It was only when I won the victory over my own heart, and cried to Him, 'Do what Thou wilt with Thine own ; she is not mine, but Thine ; I lay her in the hollow of Thy hand, do with her what Thou wilt,' that He had compassion on me, and gave her back to me. Friend—it was a sore chastening, but much blessed to me ; yet would I spare thee such pain at the hands of Him who wills not that we cling too closely to aught beside Himself."

"I wish I had your faith, your love, your patience," cried Kate, impulsive still ; "it must be beautiful to live so near to God at all times. If it had been so with me, I should never have—failed—as—miserably—as—I—have—done—"

The words were cut in two by little panting sobs. Kate was on her knees by Faith Worthy, with her face hidden on the lap of the drab gown.

There was not a stir or tremble in the quiet face above her, only a firm and gentle hand touched the bowed head.

"It is just in failure that He comes nearest to us, my daughter. It was after the long toil and darkness of the night, when the despicable were weary with a fruitless, hopeless task—it was then that, in the first grey dawn of the morning, the Master stood upon the shore. It may be so with thee, my child, even now. I know not, nor can know ; but the dawn may be breaking over the sea of trouble ; the Master's footsteps may be heard in the time of darkness and waiting."

CHAPTER XXV.

MELISSA "DOESN'T CARE."

"IT was a thing that a man could never forget—never.
It is like a nightmare to me to look back upon ; it always will be."

So absorbed and excited was William Dennis Pierrepont by the picture which his own words called up, that he became somewhat oblivious of the social conveniences, and took to walking up and down the Low Cross Rectory drawing-room, every now and again running his fingers through the ripples of his hair, and making it stand on end.

Melissa, swaying herself in an American swing chair that looked like a magnified grasshopper, was not sleepy now. On the contrary, she was alert from head to foot, a sprightly, graceful figure, with her hands clasped behind her head, and the long bows and ends of ribbon on her elbow sleeves fluttering like wing-feathers as she swayed.

"I should think it must have been dreadful—dreadful!" she said, excitement pulsing within her veins, and giving her a touch of damask rose on either cheek; "oh, Mr. Pierrepont, how could you bear to see it?"

"Just because I had to, you know," replied Will to this somewhat illogical question ; "but even now there are nights when I dream about it. Oh, yes, I do, and start up and fancy I hear that frenzied knocking, see that white, appealing face, hear that hoarse cry : 'My wife, my wife—she has left me ! She has gone I know not whither ! Come down and let me in ! Quick, quick ! We may think of some plan

together! Alas! Miss Sweetapple, that night, and many a day and many a night to follow, we have thought of this plan and that, taken this step or the other, but to what purpose? Has not John Granger spread a network of inquiry everywhere? Why, he must have spent a fortune over it; and yet, what has it all brought us in return? One solitary relic of that dearest, sweetest girl—the little kerchief found at the turn of the road, the rose leaves in the hall and on the stairs—no more, no more. And oh! to watch his breaking heart; to watch the cruel work of sorrow day by day; to see the courage and resolution of the man whom I have often thought so weak. Yes, God forgive me, I have thought him that. Miss Sweetapple, you have been my only comfort; I have kept nothing back from you; have laid my heart bare before you; have taken comfort in your sympathy, as I am sure, quite sure, she—our dear lost one—meant me to do."

"Don't say that!" cried Melissa, suddenly sitting up straight, as if she had a spring in the middle of her body; "don't say *lost*; I cannot bear it. I shall cry, I know I shall, if you say it again; and you know, Mr. Pierrepont, you won't like to see me cry. Women don't look at all nice when they cry; their noses get red, and their eyes like ferrets."

"If your nose was blue, Miss Sweetapple" (this with great earnestness), "it would not in the very slightest degree affect my estimation of you—my admiration for you"

"Hush!" said Melissa, bringing her little high heels together with a clink like a Prussian cavalry officer; "let us speak of her—of Mrs. John—of B—b—b—bonnie Kate."

"Miss Sweetapple," cried Will, standing right in front of her, with his arms folded, and his rumpled hair like the serpents of the Medusa, "you are crying now. I wish it wasn't such a foolish thing for a man to cry—I wish he didn't always look such a sickening ass when he does, you know. I've often thought since all this wretched business came about, it would do me good to have a real good cry

—I have indeed. When I think of what she said that day on the river—when I think how she said it—‘When you see, Melissa’—I really beg your pardon, you know, Miss Sweetapple, but she said it like that, you know—and it’s Kate that’s speaking now, not me. Do you see?’

“Perfectly,” said Melissa, with a deliciously dignified bend of the head.

“Ah well, that’s all right,” said Will, with a relieved air. “Then, as I was saying, she said : ‘When you see Melissa—Miss Sweetapple, how did you come to have such an uncommon name, such a very remarkable——’

“We were speaking of Mrs. John and what she said to you, were we not?”

The sleek head was held so remarkably high, the bright eyes were so persistently cast down, that Will promptly harked back ; in other words, took up his parable at the proper place.

“Yes, of course we were ; quite so. Well, she said : ‘When you see Melissa, tell her I shall never forget her goodness to me.’ You see, my cousin Kate—very clever girl, always was,—knew intuitively that when the sorrow of her loss should come upon us, we—that is, I—should naturally make my way to you sooner or later—as I have. When first Lady Whimperdale said to me in town, ‘Come to us at Steadly, Mr. Pierrepont ; you will like to see the places where your dear cousin——’

“Mr. Pierrepont,” said Melissa, putting out her hand towards him, as though to stop him ; “don’t speak in that dreadful kind of way. If you do I know that we shall *both* cry. Don’t speak as if your Cousin Kate were dead. I tell you I can’t bear it. Do you know that someone once said to Humbie that she must be *that*, and he rushed away into the woods, and never came home all night ?”

“But, Miss Sweetapple, do you know that John has made up his mind, and Aunt Cynthia, and—and that dreadful Miss Libbie, and the police——”

"I don't care that for the police!" cried Melissa, springing to her feet, and snapping her fingers in the face of an imaginary constable; "I don't care that for anybody! I tell you she's not—she's not—*she's not!*"

"Miss Sweetapple," said Will, when this ebullition was over, and Melissa, having defied the constabulary of the land as one man, lay back somewhat exhausted and breathless in her chair, "I wish that I could share your conviction. I am bound to confess that it is so strong—such a real and living thing—that, like the strong breath that blows the dying ember, it almost rekindles hope in my heart, and yet I have come to be thankful that John Granger——"

"Believes his wife to be dead?"

"Yes, I think nothing else saved him from what is worse than death itself."

"From madness?"

"Yes, that was what I feared. When he was with me that night I saw the latent madness in his restless eyes; I noted the sharp shudder that shook his frame every now and again, the sudden, helpless action of his hands as if he were pushing something away from him. Others noticed these things too. The detective whom he first employed touched his own forehead significantly, and then said: 'A bad case—a bad case, sir; and like to grow worse still.' I am sure John never slept at that time—indeed, that poor, trembling, unnerved creature that was once Aunt Libbie—told me that she used to hear him pacing, pacing up and down, up and down, muttering to himself, all through the long hours of the night. Fancy her, Miss Sweetapple, on her knees outside his closed door, shivering, shaking, afraid to sob lest he should hear her, and order her away. She, whose fault it was, so broken down, so changed, only longing for him to turn on her and rend her, as it were; and he, going about as though he were unconscious of her existence,—of anyone's—almost of his own. The awful silence of that house is a thing never to be forgotten. It is a tangible thing—

a creeping horror ; the servants speaking in whispers to each other, crouching in corners if they saw the master coming ; the flowers dead and drooping in the pretty drawing-room—the flowers she loved ; and at home, in the old home by the river, Mrs. Dulcimer, the old house-keeper of whom I told you, hovering about Aunt Cynthia—poor old Dulce looking years and years older all in a month or two, her face so lined, her hair so white ; and Chloe—— Oh, Miss Sweetapple, what strange creatures dogs are ! We never heard Chloe keen like a little banshee before. Dulce said it was a ‘sign.’ Then Aunt Cynthia—— No, I can’t speak of *her*, even to you, not yet. Uncle Anthony, before he died, told me to take care of her, to shield her from trouble. I have not been able to carry out his behest, have I ? ”

“ I can see it all,” said Melissa, “ just as you have told it me. The garden sloping to the river, the belt of trees, the shine of the water beyond, and the boat, the Daffodil, bobbing up and down among the kingcups, even little Chloe—yes, I can see it all in my mind’s eye—in my mind’s eye.”

“ I hope—I trust—I should be very sorry to think you would not——”

“ What, Mr. Pierrepont ? ” This with some amaze.

“ See it all with your natural eyes, some day,” said Will, as bold as brass.

Silence, broken only by the gentle swing of the chair on its mighty rockers.

Then Melissa set off on her own account :

“ Does not Mr. John resent Miss Libbie’s dreadful behaviour any more ? ”

“ I do not think he resents anything ; he does not seem to have it left in him. He will insist upon attending to his business engagements, and, I am told, conducted a defence wonderfully well the other day. But he is leading two lives ; one active, in his business hours ; the other a dreadful, ghastly, torpid existence that has little or nothing of life in it. No one but himself knows exactly what part Miss Libbie has

played ; no one dare ask him ; no one can ; it seems strange she should go on staying with him ; stranger still to me that she should have got a sort of hold over my Aunt Cynthia, who is full of pity for her, and when I spoke of having her forcibly taken away from Kensington and packed off to the farm, would not back me up a bit. ‘Let her stay,’ she said ; ‘she does no harm ; she will kill herself if you make her leave him. He takes no notice of her, nor of anyone. I hardly think he knew me when I went. She is more to be pitied than anyone, because she has been wicked ; but now her heart is broken, and old hearts do not mend.’ I knew she was speaking of herself as well then, and my own heart felt twenty times too big for my body ; it did, indeed.”

“And you believe,” said Melissa, after a long silence, during which neither looked at the other, and Melissa swung slowly, like a tired pendulum—“you do really think it has been better —no, less hard, let us say, for Mr. John since he believed his sweet wife dead ?”

“Well, yes, if you can use the expression ‘better’ to his state at all. You knew—did you not?—that the detectives traced someone who appeared to answer to the description of my cousin to a place far down the river, and then lost all scent ? I shall never forget the man telling me of the numbers who disappear into that dark river and are never heard of more. The man himself looked as though all the secrets of life and death were known to him—so quiet, so subtle, with such a stealthy, tiger-like step, and such a crafty, all-seeing look about his small furtive eyes. ‘It’s a pity someone doesn’t tell the poor gentleman that it’s no manner of use going on and on searching after a dead woman, that it is, sir,’ he said to me, speaking in a low, even voice that made my flesh creep. ‘Why, if she were alive, she couldn’t have escaped us. We’d men out here, and men out there ; the force isn’t to be trifled with that way ; people daren’t do it, sir. Something’s been on the poor lady’s mind, and drove her to it.’ ‘Meaning the river?’ I said, a chill shudder coursing through

my veins ; ‘meaning the river, ‘sir,’ he answered. ‘There’s a deal of ‘em goes that way ; some through drink, some through bitter sorrow—a deal of ‘em, sir, as the world never hears a word on. This case has been kep’ mighty quiet, but it’s bin watched well—watched well, and no mistake, money bein’ spent, as you may say, promisc’us-like. But you’ve got to make allowance for the currents, sir, and the way they set out to sea ; they’re stronger than twenty men’s hands a-pulling low down under the water, and they twist and turn a body round and round like a heddy making game wi’ a straw.’ He was a dreadful man, Miss Sweetapple ; his lips were always working, even when he was not speaking, as though he were chewing the cud of all the dreadful things he knew. Well, the next time I met John Granger after that interview I felt as guilty—ay, as guilty as if I had had some hand in the losing of his Bonnie Kate.”

Will was pacing up and down the room again, Melissa watching him, the swing chair at rest, her lithe hands clutching the arms of it tight.

“I don’t care for the horrid man, with his bodies and his currents, and his bogie tales—I don’t care a fig ! If he had said it all to me I would have snapped my fingers in his face —so ! and said to him, as I now say to you, ‘She isn’t—she isn’t ! I don’t believe it ! I won’t believe it ! I sha’n’t believe it !—there !’ Did her letter to her husband look as if she meant to be dead ? Did she look like a person who is likely to be dead—of her own accord, I mean ? She was in desperate trouble about—we know what, and then Miss Libbie made matters worse. Oh, she’s a dreadful creature is Miss Libbie ! I know she’s very sorry, and all that, now ; but she’s a dreadful creature. Why, even the pony knew it, and used to shy every time he met her.”

Then Melissa bent forward in her chair, and looked very gravely into Will’s face.

“Mr. Pierrepont,” she said, “do you know what Farmer Granger said when he heard that Mr. John’s wife had left

him? He said—pardon me for using the word—‘*Dang Libbie!*’ He brought his fist down on the round oak table till all the plates and pans danced like a boiling coffee-pot. The girls ran away and hid themselves. James Dodd, the young man from the ironstone works, was there, and he jumped clean out of the window. Then the farmer got up, and rushed like mad into the orchard. He looked like a man who had something in his throat that was choking him; he was purple in the face; and when he got as far as the big apple tree, he stamped on the grass, and out with it. Do you know what it was? Why—again pardon me for using the expression—‘*Dang Libbie!*’ Ebenezer heard him, and thought he was shouting at the crows. He said it just that way: ‘*Dang Libbie!*’ Mr. Pierrepont, if I were a man, I would say, ‘*Dang Libbie,*’ too.”

With a rustle, not exactly as of angels’ wings, but as of a black silk dress and a wide-sleeved dolman of magnificent proportions, Mrs. Sweetapple was in their midst.

She smiled with exceeding sweetness upon Will; frowned upon the piquant figure in the swinging-chair.

“Melissa!”

“Yes, ma.”

“What language is that I hear?”

“Farmer Granger’s, ma; he’s a bad, bold man to say such things, isn’t he?”

“You are a bad, bold girl to repeat such things. I confess I am quite at a loss to imagine what Mr. Pierrepont can possibly think of you, mixing as he does in the——”

“Highest aristocratic circles,” put in Melissa, with her eyes cast down. “Lord Whimperdale and that lot. Well, let’s hope he won’t tell them, that’s all, ma.”

“As to what I think of Miss Sweetapple,” began Will, hotly; but a warning eye—there was only room for one to show round the angle of Mrs. Sweetapple’s dolman sleeve—ordered him to desist.

He looked very much as though he were going to choke,

but obeyed the unspoken hint, and just at that moment the good Rector came doddering in from his den.

Melissa had him round the neck in a moment.

"Pa, wouldn't you say—of course I mean if you were a layman, and of course I mean if you were Farmer Granger—wouldn't you say, '*Dang Libbie?*'?"

"Well, my dear," said the Rector, with a gentle, sly smile, "if I were a layman, and if I were Farmer Granger, I think, taking into consideration the part that ill-judged woman has apparently played in late events, it is possible I might relieve my feelings by such an expression, or one equivalent to it."

"Now, Mr. Pierrepont," said Melissa, "if you tell tales of me to the highest aristocratic circles, please tell that too—say that, irreclaimable as I am, I have the sanction of the Church."

The Rector peered near-sightedly round the room.

"Is he gone?" he said confidentially to Melissa.

"If you mean the 'Rev. Bud,' as cooky calls him, he hasn't been yet. It's a pleasure to come."

"Last time he was here, he was a thought wearisome," said the Rector, rubbing his hands slowly together, and evidently taking himself to task for being on inhospitable thoughts intent; "he will be much pleasanter when he has finished improving his parish and all the people in it; in the transition stage most things are apt to be trying; so, when I heard the bell, I ventured to turn the key in my study door."

"Sermon, pa," said Melissa, with an absurd assumption of gravity. "Mustn't be disturbed; mundane matters must be rigorously excluded. It's one of the advantages of being a clergyman that you can always say you are writing a sermon if you don't want to show."

"My dear, my dear!" said the Rector, trying to look a stern reproof, but his old eyes twinkling in spite of him in the midst of their network of wrinkles; if I had known it was *Mr. Pierrepont*—"

. "Mr. Sweetapple, you are always good to me," put in Will

heartily. "You always make me welcome, and really I do feel that the way in which I have run in and out of this house ever since I have been at Steadly—I, a stranger, as one might say—"

"Nay, nay," said the old man quickly, "no one may say that; no one belonging to John Granger can be a stranger here. John was my very dear pupil; he was indeed my pride. God be with him and near him in this the day of his bitter sorrow."

For the moment the homely room felt as sacred a place as any church could be; for on each lip and in each heart was the word "Amen," though no sound was audible.

It may have been expected by the reader that Mrs. Sweetapple would be spiteful and nasty over the disappearance of young Mrs. Granger. If so, the reader will be grievously disappointed.

People who are ill-natured, and even venomous, over small social and personal matters will often drop all contentiousness of spirit when a real deep sorrow comes. I think it is one of the beautiful uses of sorrow and of trial that this should be so. Trouble welds us all together as the mortar welds the bricks, and so a fair and solid edifice of sympathy and friendship is often raised upon a site where only confusion and barrenness reigned erstwhile.

Mrs. Sweetapple was wont to observe that "you might have knocked her down with a feather"—when she was told of young Mrs. Granger's disappearance.

All the embers of romance in her heart had not yet smouldered out. She remembered the early days of her married life at Low Cross Vicarage; the shapely form, the curly locks, the bright eyes of the now infirm Rector. How proud she was of his reading, then considered fine even by the professional "parson judger" of the village—a man who described himself as one who had been "a judgin' parsons all 's loife, and wurna' goin' to take to bein' too soft wi' 'em now—not he!" How proud she was of his sermons, of

his tact and gentleness in the sick-room, of Lord Whimperdale's markedly courteous manner to him !

Oh, she could remember it all, and imagine what a terrible wrench it would have been if any dreadful thing had happened to make her, the Rector's own Penelope—his “little Pen,” as he used to call her—steal out of the house that was then so fresh and pretty, and never come back any more.

Besides all this, some slight remorse was at work in Mrs. Sweetapple's heart. It is always very unpleasant, no matter how much we dislike a person, when we have spoken harsh words to them, been intentionally unpleasant to them, and then—and then some great misfortune has overwhelmed them. Of course it is all nonsense to feel as if we really had had anything to do with the catastrophe, and yet somehow we can't shake off the feeling that we have. Mrs. Sweetapple would have given a good deal to have blotted out those peevish, unkindly words of hers, uttered in her first interview with young Mrs. Granger ; the memory of them made her feel as though she were, metaphorically, walking about with a dried pea in her boot, after the uncomfortable manner of the saints of old.

So she looked exceedingly grave as her husband spoke of John Granger's sorrow ; and Will, knowing nothing of the past, thought within himself what a sympathetic woman she was.

After a little silence—a silence that throbbed with feeling—the Rector started another subject.

“Mrs. Sweetapple and myself are going for a drive. Can we take you anywhere ?” he said genially to Will.

Mrs. Sweetapple gently and furtively twitched her spouse's sleeve.

But alas ! that excellent man was like the Israelite of old—in him there was found no guile, nor yet any manner of subtlety.

“What is it, my dear ?” he said, turning a face of gentle amaze upon his better-half. “I assure you I brushed my coat before I left the study.”

"Nothing—nothing at all, my love," said Mrs. Sweetapple, while Melissa coloured high, and really looked so charming with that additional glow upon her face that Will could not take his eyes off her.

He quite started as the Rector renewed his offer of a friendly lift.

"No—er—I thank you," he stammered. "I believe Miss Sweetapple is to dine at Steadly this evening, and the carriage—in fact, Lady Whimperdale is going to send for her early and I—er—promised Lady Whimperdale I would escort her—in fact, go with her—you see; otherwise——"

"Ah yes; I see," chuckled the Rector, "quite a little plot. Why, Penelope, you never told me the child was going to Steadly?"

At this juncture, happily perhaps, the brickdust-coloured hind-quarters and whisking tail of the Rectory pony appeared before the window as a fixture, his hog-maned head and obstinate-looking ears having previously passed like a flash.

This feat was the wizened boy's delight; namely to rush the animal along, and then bring him up short just at the doorway.

The worthy couple were soon safely ensconced in the roomy trap, and when, first the pony's reluctance to start at all, and then his rooted objection to passing through the gate, had been overcome, set off merrily down the road.

"That's the worst of Bucephalus," said Melissa to Will as the two watched the rapidly-departing vehicle out of sight; "he's so deceitful. You'd imagine he was going to keep up that pace for the next hour, but in all probability, before he reaches the turn of the lane, he'll be fixed with his head over a rail, and poor pa will be calling him any number of sweet names to encourage him, while ma stands up—looking—oh! so wobbly—and whips him all the while."

Mr. Pierrepont did not, however, seem to take any interest in the peculiarities of Bucephalus.

He was looking as nearly cross as his bright young face was capable of.

"May I ask who this young (I presume he is young) Mr. Bud is, of whom your father was speaking?"

The demureness of Melissa was a sight to see.

She seated herself once more in the swing chair, but not a swing she gave it; rather her downcast eyes and folded hands were suggestive of a Quakeress at "meeting."

"He is the Vicar of Great Gadsby."

"Ah,"—(with an intonation that seemed to say, "it's like his impudence, too")—"seems rather a—frump, eh?"

"He is the son of a dear old friend of my father's—the only son."

"You have a great regard for him, I see, Miss Sweetapple," with intense but suppressed wrath.

"I look upon him as an adopted brother."

No dove ever cooed more softly than the Rector's daughter; no nun was ever half so staid and subdued.

"And he—does he look upon you as an—ahem?—adopted sister?"

"He has never opened his mind to me upon the subject."

As she uttered this last remark Melissa altered her tactics. She raised her large bright eyes full to Will's face, looking at him with a sort of haughty amaze.

"Miss Sweetapple," he said, "I am a jealous fool. I feel I am making an ass of myself."

"Then don't do it any more," said Melissa.

"The fact is I can't help it. I have been here—in this part of the country, I mean—now for about a month, and it seems like—like a lifetime."

"I am so sorry. I really did not fancy you had found the time go so slowly."

"You know I don't mean that; you must see—you must know. Why, bless my heart, Miss Sweetapple, can't you understand that I mean I have learnt so much—felt so much—lived as I never did before? In the midst of all my sorrow and despair something seemed to say to me: 'Seek her out, find her, give her the message Kate left for her; she will sympathise with you, she will help you.'"

"Meaning me?" said Melissa suddenly, with an arch sweetness, her eyes not guiltless of the sheen of unshed tears; "meaning me, Mr. Pierrepont?"

"Meaning you, Miss Sweetapple. Who else should I mean? To whom else did my dear cousin send that last sweet message? She must have loved you very much to think and speak of you like that, and, indeed, Miss Sweetapple, I feel as if I had known you for years and years—as if I had known you all my life—as if we had grown up together."

"But we haven't," said Melissa, trembling.

"No, you see that's just where the remarkable part of it lies. If we had been brought up together there would be nothing extraordinary in my feeling as if we had; it's my feeling so when we haven't, that shows there's a sort of—a sort of fate, don't you know, in the whole thing."

We have always seen Melissa perfectly self-possessed under whatever circumstances she might be placed. We have had reason to look upon Melissa as what is generally called "a cool hand."

But Melissa was not self-possessed, Melissa was not cool—now.

A strange wave of feeling seemed gathering about her, taking possession of her whether she would or not. She girded against it, and yet it fascinated and charmed her.

She did not know it, but she was fighting for her maiden freedom. Love was the strange guest within her heart that was striving to tame her high and proud young spirit, as the hand of the captor tames the fluttering bird.

She had often thought how quickly the days had passed since Kate's cousin Will came to Steadly. She would not have acknowledged it, even under the application of thumb-screws, but she had grown to listen for a step, to hanker after a voice, to fancy that a day was somehow an empty kind of day in which she did not see Will Pierrepont. She could not even play the organ properly on Sunday because she knew he was in the Steadly pew. The "dither" itself was

not more shaky than she ; and all these things were very new to Melissa.

She wondered how it was that she felt so different in the presence of, say, Mr. Bud, and in that of young Pierrepont. Mr. Bud never made her heart leap up with a thud, and then beat as faintly as if it were going to stop altogether—not he ! Why, then, should the other ?

Could it be that she, Melissa Sweetapple, sauciest, freest, most thoughtless of maidens, was in love ?

“Why so silent these days, my child ?” said the Rector to her very tenderly one evening.

“Oh, pa, ducky, I’ve so much to think of !” she answered, with her arm about his neck, and her face hidden against his shabby old coat.

And that was just the truth of it.

She had so much to think of.

Kate—Bonnie Kate—gone from their midst, they knew not whither ; lost, as you might drop a flower by the wayside and never see it more ; lost, the sweetest, truest, dearest woman she had ever known, and now the task set her of trying to read her own heart—that book that puzzled her so sadly, and was writ in a strange language, marvellous in her eyes.

Katharina tamed was the meekest of God’s creatures. Your high-spirited woman flings herself at the feet of the man she loves with an abandon unknown to your meek and gentle, putty-faced girl, who looks as if she couldn’t say bo ! to a goose, and yet holds her own with the tenacity of indiarubber.

So with Melissa.

She grew timid as a fawn ; she said to herself it could not be that this bright, glorious creature, daring and brave, chivalrous and tender, loved her, the daughter of a country home, unskilled in the ways of the world, hasty and untutored in speech, dressed in gowns stitched by her own fingers ; and yet—and yet——

He came so often, and he stayed so long ; he made out the walk from Steadly (miles and miles) a “mere stroll” ; he seemed so happy by her side

Anyhow those last words of his pierced her through and through.

"A sort of fate in the whole thing——"

A strange thought came over her. She remembered the old farm, and the motto that clasped it round : "God's Providence is My Inheritance."

Was this God's Providence for her ? Was this—this great and wonderful love—a sacred gift, coming into her life like a strain of beautiful music, making the very air she breathed sweet and melodious as the woods in spring ?

By this time Melissa was too far gone to make merry at anyone's expense : she hadn't a spark of drollery left in her. Her hands were cold, though the sunshine streamed royally into the shabby, comfortable old room ; her lips were tremulous : her eyes kept growing misty.

She couldn't have made a joke, though her life depended on it, which shows to what a pass things had come with Melissa. She determined to answer him according to his own mood. She got up, and came and stood beside him, tall, slender, proud in the spotless purity of her maidenhood, yet timid in the shadow of the coming womanhood that was touching her fair, sleek head.

"I am glad you feel to me as if we had known each other all the time, as if we had grown up together ; for I feel so, too, to you. I feel that I can say to you all that is in my heart about your Cousin Kate, and I want you to listen to me for a little while—only a little while."

"Miss Sweetapple," he broke out, looking all at once as if he had been running hard and had just stopped, "I could listen for ever."

But she had made a sudden gesture of the hand, that told him in a moment she was not wanting to speak of herself, or for him to do so—not just yet. Her eyes had a rapt, serious earnestness new to them—and to him, meeting them.

"Mr. Pierrepont," she said, "your cousin is not dead, and you and I must find her."

"Not dead!" he said, coming close to her, and staring hard into her face—"not dead! You speak as though you had certain knowledge, as though you had seen her."

"So I have," she answered; "I have seen her not once but many times, in a strange dream that comes to me again and again, and I know the dream is true. Mr. Pierrepont, sometimes our own longing is so great, so intense, that it gives us the gift of second sight."

"You speak in parables, Miss Sweetapple."

"Do I?" she said, a dreamy smile lighting up her face as might the soft, subdued shimmer of moonlight. "They are not parables to me. Listen, and I will tell you."

Melissa pressed her hand upon her eyes. She stood there like a young sybil, and Will watched her as a worshipper watches the idol he adores.

"There is a long, low shore, with the sea creeping over it in long, low ripples. Trees grow very near the shore—almost down to the edge of the tide. A little chapel stands only a space away, and through its pointed windows shines a small, steady light. I have seen her, your cousin, standing on that shore, seen her looking out across the sea with such a yearning look upon her face that I have known she was thinking of those who love her. I have seen her wave her hand, as though in greeting, seen her turn away, seen the still light from the chapel windows touch her as she passed, and then, striving vainly to follow her, woke, with my heart beating as though it would burst, and with the cold sweat of fear upon my face. I have dreamt this, not once, but over and over again, and I know—I know that it is true."

By this time Will was leaning his elbows on the mantelshelf, and his face was hidden in his hands.

She touched him lightly on the shoulder, forgetting in her earnestness the shyness of the past.

"Think," she said, "of the sorrow that has come upon so many; of the breaking heart of John Granger, of his shattered life; of the terrible grief that has but now made the old

farmhouse so desolate ; of Humbie, of yourself, of me : think of all these, and say that you will help me. Oh, Mr. Pierrepont, I must find her—I must ! God will show me the way. He will put some power into my hand. Only say that you believe me, say that you trust me. Let us think what we can do ; how we can set about it. Never mind how many have failed before us ; let us try—together."

The last word came very, very softly to his ear, and then he raised his head and looked at her ; he put his arm about her shoulders and drew her closely to him.

"I will help you, Melissa, with all my heart and soul if you will tell me with those dear lips that are so near me now, that you will give me the right to help you in every trouble that may come to you as long as my life and yours shall last. Will you give me this right, my darling, just because I love you so very, very dearly ? "

She did not speak.

Surely in these latter days a great exposition of silence had come over Melissa !

But her eyes met his, long and earnestly ; and then he bent to her and kissed her on the mouth ; and Melissa kissed him back.

It was a strange, a solemn sort of betrothal, but none the less sweet for that.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MASTER'S CALL.

"Only a line in the paper,
That somebody read aloud."

HERE and there among the tangle and the trees was a dash of glow and fire. The great painter Nature was beginning to put in the colours of her landscape in deeper tints. Presently she would make it a study in black and white, with only one single bit of colour—Robin's rosy breast gleaming among the snow-clad boughs ; but the time for that was not yet.

The year was what is sometimes called "on the turn," and you might notice a certain subdued hurry and fluster among the birds that comes over them when their instinct tells them winter is on the way, though not yet in sight. Perhaps they may be wondering whether a good store of hips and haws will be forthcoming, and if the juicy black berries of the elder tree will be as plentiful as they ought to be, and these topics may call for much earnest conversation. I cannot say, but I have certainly often noticed this kind of quiet flutter in the bird world when first autumn touches the woods, and lights up here and there a glow that is but the signal of approaching death.

The little blue tit runs up the bark of the trees, like someone going upstairs in a mighty hurry ; the thrush puffs ~~out~~ his speckled breast and flies from bough to bough ; the rook walks miles and miles in stalking up and down the pasture

land ; and Robin—Robin doesn't flutter about much, but he sits on the rail and utters now and again one long, plaintive, pathetic note, his coronach over the summer that is dying and the long, sweet days that are closing in like the flowers—

Oh, the sad, sweet note that Robin sings
When the day begins to die,
When the shadows deepen, and the wind
Falls to a gentle sigh. . . .

Kate found herself many a time and oft fancying how the swaying wreaths of the virginian-creeper on the house at Kensington were growing ruddy here and there, how the massed trees about Low Cross Farm were patched with splashes of fiery red or glowing amber. She always tried to tear her mind from the past, and centre it upon the present ; but the old memories and the old associations asserted their power over her at times, and she would sit motionless with her head on her hand, lost in a reverie, from which she would rouse herself to find Friend Benjamin's child eyes watching her with tender and wistful amaze. When he saw she noticed him he would come timidly forward and offer her a posy he had been busily gathering, or perhaps lay it down beside "little son's" velvet-soft cheek, and then point to it, and laugh the low, guttural laugh of pleasure peculiar to him when happy.

It was strange how the baby had come to be known by one name only—"little son." He was everyone's "little son," the precious possession of the whole house of Dromore. Even the carrier asked after him in the same quaint fashion, looking admiringly at Biddy's smiling face as he handed in his parcels.

"And how's the 'little son' after getting on, the cratur?"

"Oh, he's rare and foine," would Biddy say, "and such a soizable child too ! Why, it's the arms of me that's after aching when I've carried him for ten minutes up and down the grass walk."

This she would say with a sly eye at the carrier and a watchful, lest she should detect the smallest lurking grin upon his Hibernian countenance ; but she watched in vain, for he couldn't have looked more serious had he been at Mass, and happily Biddy could not see him when he was safely inside the hood of his cart and off round the corner.

"Ah, but he's got a believing sowl ; he's great faith en-tirely," she would say to herself as she watched the vehicle depart, little wotting that the hood was like charity, and covered a multitude of sins.

It was wonderful how ingenious Friend Benjamin showed himself in the way of devising amusements for "little son," and what quiet happiness he found in the (supposed) appreciation of that potentate for the same. Not being knowledgeable in the ways of the very young of the human species, he put all sorts of remarkable constructions on the child's every action, calling upon the bystanders to admire its intelligence and many virtues. No one knew whence came into existence at this particular time a sort of small flute, whose gamut consisted of five weird, plaintive notes ; but no doubt, from the frequency with which the unpretending instrument discoursed "most excellent music" among the tangled, shadowy pathways of the old garden, the birds thereabout must have imagined that a new and wonderful addition to their community had taken place.

It was strange, too, how those five dropping notes became inexplicably associated in Kate's mind with the whole life at Dromore. Biddy would sit on an old-fashioned wooden chair out in the sunshine with "little son" upon her ample lap, and hard by Friend Benjamin, seated like some sylvan fawn, in the fork of an ancient tree, or squatted contentedly on the mossy turf, would try to charm his idol with a diet of sweet sounds.

Every now and then he would cease playing, go on tip-toe to Biddy's side, and peer into the little, quiet face, so unlike all other babies' faces, in which were set the wonder of those great, dark eyes, so strangely full of pathos for eyes that had as yet only looked upon the world for a few short weeks.

Sunday mornings were times of vast content to Benjamin, for then two figures clad in dove-coloured garments, with long silk shawls and tunnel-like bonnets of the same hue, would set off down the road that led into the city, and he—Benjamin Worthy—be left in solemn charge of the dear lady and the “little son.”

Alas! poor Benjamin little knew that this giving in charge was but a binding him with fetters of love and honour that his sisters knew would prove more sure than chains of iron or cords of hemp. With hearts that beat lightly—that is, as lightly as Quaker hearts can or should—in their bosoms, the two set out on the long tramp that ended in a small paved court, where the sad-coloured meeting-house swallowed up the sad-coloured figures, and whence, upon certain solemn occasion, Friend Worthy would emerge after meeting with such a light upon her face as made one understand the shining on the face of Moses after he had talked with God—in other words, lifted up his own heart in meditation and supplication, until it seemed to touch the very heaven itself.

Meanwhile Friend Benjamin would do his best to make up for the lack of gates at the great gate-posts, for so often did he steal on tip-toe, to be wary and circumvent the enemy should that desperate character be lurking in ambush, and call for a “surprise movement,” that he took quite a long walk between the seat beneath the cedar and the gates that ought to have been there and weren’t. He would even go so far as to prod the bossy green bushes on the way down, and gaze, almost to the oversetting of his own equilibrium, into the sky overhead, because, most unfortunately, the book the lady had given him contained a picture of a little child being carried away by an eagle. Benjamin had had a long disputation with himself as to the possibility of the great bird with the hooked nose being an emissary of good to convey the pictured infant to the abode of bliss “above the stars”; but he finally came to the conclusion that it would be highly objectionable to allow any bird, however taking or highly gifted, to fly away

with "little son," and recognised the urgent need of keeping a watch above as well as below.

The fiction that Kate's little one was a monstrously fine baby was consistently kept up by faithful Biddy, and even allowed to pass in silence by Friend Faith, while Prue openly encouraged it.

"Sure and it's after finding a new name for him we'll have to be, the darlint!" would Biddy exclaim, lifting him gingerly in her arms as though afraid lest her strength might succumb under his weight; "we'll have to be after calling him the 'big little son,' God bless him! or folks will never be after knowin' who we're manin'. I showed him to the carrier the night before this one, and he couldn't believe his eyes at all, at all. 'So young,' says he, 'and such a size! The saints be good to us!' says he. 'He's a young Methusalem entoirely!'"

But Kate, after listening to all this tender "blarney," and much more like it, would have to turn her head aside to hide the tears in her eyes, and once safely alone with her babe, kiss the little waxen cheek on which the long dark lashes showed like ebony, and hold the tiny hand pressed against her lips as though to stay their trembling.

The silence and the calm of everything in the life around her was healing the sore wounds in Kate's heart, dissipating, too, those mists that had gathered about her mental vision and prevented her seeing clearly the demarcation between right and wrong—between what was real and what was only the product of a misguided imagination.

There were no newspapers at Dromore, no talk about the world outside the lichen-covered walls of the tangled garden. It was indeed an innovation that the customers at the "tables" should ask after "Mrs. Sinclair" and the "little son." But the sisters were indulgent so far, looking upon it that the sudden advent of a baby in their midst was an event calculated to disturb the calm even of the deepest pool.

Before this event conversation had been strictly limited to the

business in hand, and to what Biddy called "passing the time of day."

Kate's fingers were seldom idle. Endless were the fairy garments to be fashioned for "little son"; wonderful the warm and cosy raiment with which he needed to be fortified for his journey "over seas." Then a lovely Irish poplin, the colour of a dove's breast, had been got from a celebrated mart in Grafton Street—got secretly—and was being worked at secretly in the seclusion of Kate's room; fashioned after true Quaker lines, and yet with a certain chic and go about it that suggested Prue to you, even if you had not been told for whom it was destined.

There was something indeed about Prue altogether that very closely attracted Mrs. Sinclair; a certain jauntiness—if such a word can be used without sacrilege to a member of the Society of Friends—a determination to carry things off in the best manner, and to show a brave face to the little world about her.

"A garden has to run wild for years and years before such groundsel as that can grow in it, thee knows," she one day said, as the two paced the mossy walks.

Prue was gently boastful of the crop in question, and had quite an air, as though the dear old garden had been let run riot of its own sweet will, by deep design, and in order to produce a treat for the canaries of the neighbourhood.

"Neighbour Grantly often asks for a spray or two for her songsters, and she'll say to me, 'There's no groundsel to be got like yours, Miss Prudence.' Oh yes, she says 'Miss Prudence.' It's not right, thee knows, for her to call me so, but she's a heedless and worldly body, and means nothing harmful."

These little chats and many like them always came about when Friend Faith was not of the company, and had a fearful joy for Friend Prue.

On one side of the garden wall was a plum tree, stretching *out long arms* so far that on one side it had to turn the

corner, and in spring made quite a two-sided room of snowy blossoms for the bees to revel in and the birds to nestle in.

This plum-tree was evidently looked upon by the sisters of Dromore as a most important item in their family possessions, and it was pretty to hear them dating this or that small event by its then condition.

"Nay, thee knows it couldn't have been in autumn time, for the tree was white with blossom ;" or, "That was in the fall of the year, for the plums were purple. Don't thee mind how Biddy brought one in on a leaf, with a great wasp right in its heart, and how angered she was with the poor insect that meant nothing harmful ?" or yet again : "That was in winter ; there was not a leaf on the plum-tree, and all the red wall showing in between the boughs."

In such still lives as theirs the only changes are those of the seasons ; the great events, the bursting of the bud, the unfurling of the frond, the blossoming of the flower, the fall of the leaf, the gentle snow-shroud laid upon the sleeping world.

No other book being near, the book of Nature is so lovingly studied, so persistently read, that it is known off by heart, word for word.

Kate was never weary listening to her hosts' placid talk of the old neglected garden and its teeming store of wonders. Happily for her, the General had trained her to take a keen interest in little things ; to find a real pleasure in what was nearest at the moment—a power for which neither man nor woman can be too thankful.

Friend Benjamin would lead her all over the pretty wilderness in pursuit of a blue dragon-fly, not to catch and slay, that would have seemed a sort of murder in his eyes, but just to watch it settle, all of a quiver like a rainbow in the sunlight, on the bosom of a flower. He would hold her back half fearfully by the hand, lest she should scare it from its perfumed couch. Once he brought her in a little brown

owl, the daintiest bunch of mottled feathers ever seen, and in their midst two eyes like golden stars ; then, when she had admired it enough, he carried it away again, climbed to the fork of an old wide-girthed tree, and put it tenderly back into a hollow in the bole.

And so the summer had worn away, and now the autumn was at hand ; the plums were purple on the wall ; the tips of the tree-boughs made "sunshine in a shady place" ; yet Kate still lingered at Dromore. More than one letter had come from over the sea full of love and longing, like Hiawatha's love song, asking no questions, pleading for no explanations.

And yet Kate did not make a start.

She said to herself that she shrank from leaving her gentle friends ; that to take "little son" away from Dromore would be to make it desolate indeed ; that Friend Benjamin would fall into his "moods" again ; wander away for days—the while the sisters never slept and scarcely ate, and Biddy spent all her earnings in burning candles before the altar in the chapel by the sea—returning at last in rags and tatters, led by some kindly wanderer not much keener-witted than himself. Prue would miss her too ; and lose the keen delight of those little worldly conversations in Mrs. Sinclair's room that had for her a fearful joy. Kate dare not say even to herself that Friend Faith would miss her, that would have been to presume too much. But here it is very probable that Mrs. Sinclair was at fault. She could not gauge the depth of feeling and affection hidden under the Quakeress's chastened bearing. If it were good for the dear stranger who had sojourned within their gates to leave them, Friend Faith's hand would not be stretched out to detain her ; but I could not vouch that when "talking to the stars" one pure pellucid tear would not have stolen down the pale fair cheek outlined by the Quaker cap. Perhaps Friend Faith herself hardly realised how closely the stranger and "little son" had crept into her closely-guarded heart. Perhaps she hardly realised

how the touch of the little velvet fingers closing round her own had stirred all the latent motherhood in her nature, or what a sense of blankness would fall upon her when Kate's clear eyes should look at her no more, and the soft *frou-frou* of the dainty worldly dresses should no more make soft music about the old house. It was not Friend Faith's method to let herself go in the way of attaching herself too closely to anything in this material world ; but, unconsciously to herself, the lines that bound her to the young mother and the little child deepened and strengthened ; her life had become like some scene along which a wayfarer passes with eyes upraised to the glowing hills towards which he journeys, and all at once he becomes conscious of a strain of ravishing sweetness filling all the air about him. So softly has it stolen on his senses that he hardly knows when or where it took its first rise ; he steps onward, falling unconsciously into the swing of its cadence ; it has become a part of the very air he breathes. He does not think about it—he only feels it, but when it ceases, his ear aches with the silence. Then he knows what the sweetness has been.

"Do you know, Friend Faith," said Kate to her one day, as the two sat out in the garden that was so fair a parlour with its garniture of autumn leaves, "you are very like someone who is very different."

"Thee hast not lived in our Green Isle for nothing," said Friend Faith with a smile.

"Yes, I know that sounds like a very Irish speech," returned Kate, laughing, so that "little son," who was lying placidly sleeping on her lap, opened his big eyes, and put a little pink palm against her face ; "but it was just what I mean. You are like someone who was very good to me long ago, or it seems long ago—like Lady Whimperdale of Steadly."

Then Kate caught her breath. The sound of her own voice uttering the old familiar name hit her like a stinging nettle.

"I am glad, Neighbour—what is it?—Whimperdale was

good to thee. But I care not to be likened to any of the great ones of the world. I walk in sheltered ways, and know not of much that lies beyond those walls that gird us in."

"Yes," said Kate, "that is what I meant; it is all so different, and yet I think—I know it is the shining of the same light from heaven; it is the indwelling spirit of the Master; the spirit of a never-failing love, and a sympathy that is ever ready; and these things write themselves—"

"Dost thee not think it grows full late for 'little son' to be out among shadows that are growing?" said Friend Faith, rising to her feet as she spoke, and bending over the still sleeping face clipped round by the soft wool hood, with its jaunty rose-pink cockade and rose-hued border.

Kate, feeling herself repressed, rose also, carried "little son" into the house, left him in faithful Biddy's care, and set off—by no means a rare thing, indeed, for her to do—upon a solitary ramble.

She loved to wander alone by the sea, to listen to the sob of the ripple on the sand, the cry of the sea-mew piercing the grey mist that floated in the offing. She loved to watch the little red-sailed boats drifting before the wind, as she herself had drifted before an overpowering influence whose breath, alas! was not of heaven.

This night, as the light faded from the land, lingering on the water in a flush of palest gold, the still shining of the lamp within the little chapel—the lamp that was ever burning night and day—glowed like a pale star among the shadows, while from within came the subdued chant and swing of many voices, their cadence floating gently out across the sea.

Lucis, creator optime
Lucem dierum proferens,
Primordiis lucis novae
Mundi parans originem;
Qui mane junctum vesperi
Diem vocari praecepis,
Illabitur teturum chaos,
Audi preces cum letibus.

Was she not indeed wandering in the darkness, longing for light? Was it not being borne in upon her how far—how very far from the pathway whereon the blessed light of heaven falls all soft and radiant—her erring feet had wandered?

Illabitur teturum chaos—that was indeed the story of her own heart; well might her prayers go up with tears out of the gloom that had gathered around her.

For the first time Kate set in black and white before her own eyes the true reason that was holding her back from further wandering, that kept her lingering on at Dromore. She was loth to cross the sea—the great pathless sea that is to all of us the symbol of distance and bitter parting. She shrank from setting its storm-tossed depths between herself and the man she had deserted, just because she had not had the courage to take the rough with the smooth—to face the difficulties that met her at every turn.

True, she had condoned her own sin to herself by saying that John would be better without her—that she was, in fact, placing on her own brow the crown of martyrdom in tearing herself away from his side.

But as water that is troubled is turbid for awhile, so that we cannot see through it, and being at rest, regains its clearness and brightness, so in the quiet of the life at Dromore, and above all, in the dear companionship of Friend Faith, Kate was learning to look into the past and read it clearly.

Cowardice, impatience, self-love—these were the evil trinity that she recognised as the true motives that had driven her upon a fatal course—these, and a lack of the love that “endureth all things.”

She had told herself in the days that were past how dearly she loved John Granger; she had questioned herself as to her capabilities of making him happy; she had thought to lose herself in another—to merge her life in his; but when the first sharp trouble came, when the first sharp breath of trial made itself felt, what a poor thing this love of hers proved to be! John deceived her—deceived her “because he loved her so dear,” and she—she could not forgive him.

Her mean, pitiful love could not rise to magnanimity ; why, it scarce deserved to be called love, since it failed so utterly—so miserably !

The tears dimmed her eyes ; the sea and the mist trembled before her, and still the vesper hymn rang on—the hymn that is of no Church and no creed, but is the glorious possession of all humanity—the cry of those who wander among the shadows for the light that shineth from above :—

“ Thick flows the flood of darkness down ;
Oh, hear us when we weep and pray,
Thou blest Creator of the day.”

The little congregation of evening worshippers were straggling out into the dusk—the grey, mysterious gloaming from whose midst came up the whispering voice of the sea—before Kate turned her steps towards Dromore.

Her heart had been deeply stirred. Thoughts of the old home swarmed and clung about her, a sad-faced crowd of ghostly visitants, they seemed to press close to her, lifting reproachful faces, intangible yet full of uncanny, eerie life, to her own. The faint mist through which she was passing took strange shapes that seemed to beckon to her with waving, indefinite hands. Impatient with her own perturbed state of mind, with that highly-strung nervous condition best described as being “fey,” she strove to shake it off. She brought forward before the tribunal of her own thoughts still more of the reasons that had kept her stationary so long, and so prevented her following out her programme of intentions to the end.

There was Friend Faith. No striving after undue influence—or, indeed, any influence at all—had that dear lady betrayed at any time. Rather the reverse. She seemed to shrink from relying on, or being conscious of, her own personality too much for that ; and yet there was no resisting her. Living beside her day by day was like walking with a strong, tender, loving hand for ever clasping yours and leading you whither it would.

The assured certainty with which she spoke of the waiting attitude of a child towards a loving father being the attitude of a faithful soul towards the Father in Heaven constrained you and encompassed you round, whether you would or no. The patient listening for the voice of the Spirit that guides and counsels men made you listen—almost unconsciously at first—for the echo of that “still, small voice.”

Kate had felt at times as though she could never brave the ordeal of meeting the grave, steadfast eyes of the gentle Quakeress, and saying, while they looked at her :

“ I am going to start on my further journey ; I am going to put the sea between me and——”

How should she end the sentence ? Why, the truth would be dragged from her, though that other should speak not a word. She would finish her story thus :

“ I am going still further astray ; I am going to leave behind me duties forsaken, hearts riven, resolves and vows torn to rags and tatters. I am going to say to myself and to others : ‘ I must live for my child alone.’ But God, who reads the heart, and cannot be deceived by the utterance of the lips, will know that what I am going to do is to live for self—self—self ! Nothing higher and nothing better. He will know that, because the path I chose was not all of flowers, because here and there a sharp thorn pricked my feet, because in places the way was steep and narrow, I turned aside, longing for some vale of ignoble rest, where struggle should exist no longer, and neither will nor fancy should be crossed.”

This said, she would fall prone at the feet of the silent woman whose eyes were “ homes of silent prayer,” she would entreat her to speak out loud in just condemnation.

Two spirits warred within this tortured woman’s heart—the pride that loathed defeat, and the passionate longing to walk once more in the path of right and duty.

Absorbed in her own thoughts she had not noticed how the white milky mist that on that coast drifts in so suddenly, from the sea, had deepened and thickened about her. It was only

when she came to a spot where three roads diverged that she realised she could hardly see as far as her hand could reach. She knew that the low-lying coast was behind her, and turned to make sure that from thence came the far-off sough of the sea, and in a moment all sense of the locality of sound was lost.

The murmur of the waters was all round her, singing in her ears, throbbing in her brain. She knew there was some old sand-pits near ; places, in which the peat had been dug out to deep, uneven depths. Which way should she turn ? Just then five sweet falling notes came out of the heart of the grey gloom.

"Friend Benjamin !" she cried ; "have you come to look for me ? I am here."

Again came the flute notes, plaintive and low ; again Kate answered them ; and then a figure loomed through the fog, a figure looking strange and ghostly enough with its outlines all blurred and its size magnified almost miraculously.

But Kate saw the long white hair and the child face, and stretching out her hand met Friend Benjamin's friendly grasp.

"I came to seek you," he said. "Why do you wander like this, and leave us to sorrow ? I let the flute call to you, for it can speak better than I can, and I thought you would know its voice."

"Did they send you ?" said Kate, as hand-in-hand the two paced homewards.

"No," he said, "I came myself. No one knew but Biddy ; she said 'little son' was sobbing in his sleep, and she feared some evil had befallen you, since he was keening so. She told me not to fright the others. Faith was talking to the stars. I saw her sitting in her room, with her hands in her lap. 'The stars are gone though, now, are they not ?' he went on, peering upwards into the clouds that floated and swayed and twisted above their heads ; "but Faith says they are there all the same, though we cannot see them ; they are shining

ever so brightly beyond the darkness. I am glad of that. I am glad they never go out. They are God's lamps."

Friend Benjamin knew every step of the way. No fear he would lead Kate into sand-pits or peat-holes. The "simple one" is often dowered with a sort of extra sense that gives him a wonderful conversance with Nature and her every haunt. If you had blindfolded Friend Benjamin he would have found his way all about Dromore and for miles round as easily as though he had the full use of his eyes ; a knowledge that was the outcome of infinite ramblings in every possible direction, and cunning notice of every bush and briar, beck and bank.

Before, however, Dromore was reached they came to the edge of the mist, where in long and jagged fringes it trailed along the meadows and above the hedgerows.

"I am always finding you," said Benjamin, with a soft low chuckle, as they went through the porch.

"Indeed you are," said Kate, "and you are always good to me."

He took his broad-brimmed hat off, bending low in an old-fashioned, chivalrous salute, and stood there bareheaded watching her as she went in and up the stairs.

"Glory be, and it's myself that's glad to see ye back again," cried Biddy, "and 'little son' sobbing fit to burst himself, and him aslape, the darlint, all the blessed time! 'Go,' says I to Mr. Benjamin, 'and seek her out ; the fog's after coming up from the say, and it's like enough to ketch hold on her.' Were ye down by the chapel, and did ye hear the vespers now ? Don't they sing lovely ? and isn't Father Delany the beautiful praste entoirely ? Ah, but he's the crafty one too. When I was a slip of a colleen, and went to confess meeself to him—'Father,' says I, 'I laughed in chapel.' 'I saw ye,' says he. 'Father,' says I, 'I pulled Honora's gownd to make her laugh same as me.' 'I saw ye,' says he, and with that I up and fled, and never stopped a pace till I got home and hid my head in my mother's lap. Ah, he's an old man now, is

Father Delany, but he never forgets he was once the broth of a boy himself, and he's mighty gentle wi' the young, God bless him ! Once he saw me tyn' a knot o' ribbon on the tree beside the wishin' well. 'And is it a swateheart you're after wishin' for, Biddy Magrath ?' says he. So I stood there and crumpled up my apron, so modest like you never saw, and 'Father,' says I, 'what may a swateheart be ?' 'A fruit,' says he, 'my child, that if it's plucked too early is sour in the mouth.' Ah, but he's the sensible one, is Father Delany, and well he knew what I was afther, and me not fifteen by the clock. But I weary you with my chatter," said Biddy suddenly, with a sharp glance at Mrs. Sinclair's pale, tired face ; "and here's 'little son' wi' his blessed eyes wide open lookin' at his mammy. Here goes to take him up. Sure, and they that has to lift ye my jewel, needs to have a strong back."

Biddy did not look at her mistress as she made this last astounding statement ; but then, her face was buried in the baby's neck, and she was cuddling him up to her breast, so she couldn't very well.

All through the rest of that evening the feeling of being under some strange irresistible influence clung to Kate in spite of herself. The story of her wanderings in the mist was told, and Prue made some gentle jest about the sound of the shepherd's pipe in the meadows bringing home the lost sheep. Benjamin, with his flute sticking out of the breast-pocket of his drab coat, assisted at the recital, and laughed to himself as he cut out a flight of wild ducks, so true to life that their wings seemed stirred by the wind against which they flew.

And so the evening passed, and the hour came when all the lights were low, and the bolts of the old-fashioned door were in their rests. Kate was very weary. Mental conflict takes it out of us more than many miles.

"Little son" slept the sweet sleep of infancy. Little pink palm under soft baby cheek, the faintest flush upon the dear wee face ; the rosebud lips apart to let the milky breath come and go ; tiny rings of silken hair upon the waxen brow ~~damny~~ with the gentle sweat of sleep.

The mother should have been resting beside him, but, with a shower of soft, close kisses upon the hand that lay outside the coverlet, she had moved away to the window, where the blind was still undrawn.

There was no trace of the mist left now. God's lamps shone clear and bright amid the purple of the sky, and over the sea, that was but a faint grey distant line, hardly discernible, hung the pale crescent moon.

In the beauty and the silence of the night the phantoms of the past crowded once more about Kate's heart and memory, and one special incident of her short married life came so vividly before her as to be almost a scene enacted before her very eyes.

John had been ill, over-anxious about a "case," sleepless for nights. Then came a night when towards the early hours he slept heavily, as those sleep who have been denied the boon of rest for some while back. Kate lay wakeful and watching, fearful lest some baying dog or noisy wanderer of the night should break his slumber. It seemed to her that he was safer while she thus kept vigil. His breathing, hurried at first, grew calmer. She was so thankful, lying there in the silence. Then the dawn began to define the window in the wall—grew to a pale grey light that touched and showed the profile and the dark head upon the pillow by her side. Softly she raised herself upon her elbow and watched, as the face she loved grew more and more distinct. It was like watching a picture grow beneath the hand of the artist.

But all at once, with a chill shudder, the thought came over Kate that John would look like that—so grow into distinctness and clearness as the day dawned—if he were gone from her for ever, and lay dead in the flower and beauty of his manhood; and with this thought came a keen cutting stab of pain, something that told her that if that were so indeed, then would death be hers as well, since her life would be henceforth a lifeless thing.

Full of this memory of the past that was in reality

not so very far away, yet seemed divided by an eternity from the present hour, at last she lay down to sleep beside the "little son," but, sleeping, dreamed, and in her dream saw John lying still and motionless with the morning light upon his face. Touching that stirless face (still in her dream) she felt it cold with the cold that is like no other, shook him, clasped him in her arms, called upon his name, but knew all the while that neither kiss nor clasping could wake from that sleep that knows no earthly waking.

Kate woke with a cry.

The garish sun poured in through the window of which she had left the blind undrawn, and upon "little son," still softly sleeping, its golden radiance seemed to smile.

Kate's brow was dank with sweat; she trembled and shook as one who is chilled to the marrow of the bones.

In a noble, determined effort to calm herself she took up a book from the table by her bed and strove to read.

"It will not be long," she thought, "before Biddy comes. I hear her stirring down below, and there is the click of Friend Prue's door. Prue is always the first astir."

The book she held in her hand had been brought to her by a lady only the day before, and she had not yet looked at it.

The cover was thrifitly protected by a newspaper, and, as something caught her eye printed in clear large letters in its columns, Mrs. Sinclair sprang from her bed, and stood stammering and staring by the sunshine-flooded window.

"Kate, Bonnie Kate, come back—come back! Your husband is lying grievously sick, nigh unto death. Come back, come back!"
MELISSA."

A strange figure, with a wealth of brown hair floating over its shoulders, with wild, wide eyes, white stricken face, and hands groping as if to find some stay, with long floating drapery clinging about its slender limbs, with bare feet spurning the old oak floor, rushed into Friend Faith's room, just as that dear lady had finished her morning meditation.

"Mrs. Sinclair—Kate!" she cried, frightened for once out of her calm. "My child—my child! what is it?"

Kate was on her knees grasping Friend Faith's hands with painful tightness.

"Help me—help me!" she gasped. "My husband—the man whom I deserted—lies at the point of death! Oh, my God! have pity on me! Let me not reach his side—too late!"

"I told thee," said Friend Faith, bending tenderly over her and clasping her—"I told thee the dawn would come; and now—Nay, weep not as those who have no hope; God is good, His mercy is infinite—He gave me back my Prue; and now—it is even as I said—the Master calleth for thee."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

IT was a night of sudden showers and intervals of bright moonlight. The showers were sharp and sudden, the rain stinging the window-panes and splashing on the pavements, while the clouds tore across the sky at reckless speed, with long jagged fringes trailing out behind them. When the storm passed, and the moon shone out, her light made all the wet leaves shine like ebony studded with diamonds. Now and again soft, white scud, fine and transparent as a bride's veil, flitted across her face, only to add to her beauty. The gas-lamps were nowhere in the struggle for pre-eminence in the matter of giving out light, for what can you do—supposing you are a lamp—when you are all blown sideways, and made to burn in little jerks and flickers by the impudence of the wind, that is up to all manner of pranks, and no respecter of persons? The dignity of a steady radiance is not to be attained to under the circumstances, and what right has the moon to crow and exult over you, as she so evidently does, since she is miles and miles out of reach of the impudent gale, and no unfeeling official with a long ladder comes to put her out, whether she likes it or not, in the early hours of the morning?

The lamp opposite the house in Kensington in which our interest centres, was several times in very bad case indeed, for, whiff! came the wind round the corner, the long arms of the virginia Creeper swung from side to side, lashing

the windows as they swayed, and the lamp-flame bent and cowered, making a little bubbling sound of protest that the wind was utterly callous to. The horse in the doctor's brougham that stood at the gate of the house did not approve of this flickering just above his head, and as nobody took the slightest notice of his pawing the ground with an impatient hoof as a hint to the coachman to move on, he thought the best thing he could do was to pull back a pace or two, and then move forward with a jerk, this being the most likely thing to make it uncomfortable for the man on the box.

However, the sudden tightening of the rein put an end to these manœuvres of his just as the house door opened and the doctor came out. One or two muffled-looking figures accompanied him to the door, and the wind brought the sound of a sentence to the man-servant's ears.

"I wish I could say more."

There are times, I think, when a doctor is greatly to be pitied ; and surely one of these times is when a whole household hang upon his words, watch his looks, try even to interpret his silence, his nod, his frown, as though he were some oracle of old, and they the agonised devotees to whom his verdict meant life or death.

And that is just it—it is so often life or death ; hope or despair ; half-sobbing congratulations, when he is gone ; or the strained, tight handclasps that say what the tongue dares not utter.

At such times well may the thought arise in his heart—the words to his lips :

"I wish I could say more."

The muffled figures disappeared into the house, not, however, before one, a man tall and slightly built, detached himself from the rest, came out into the wet, shimmering night, and followed the doctor to the brougham door.

The man of healing with one foot on the step, turned sympathetically towards him.

"I wish I could say more, but there is nothing more

to say ; it all depends upon absolute quiet and his being able to take the nourishment at regular intervals." Then he repeated the last but one injunction again, separating each syllable of the adjective : " Ab-so-lute quiet. Good-night."

The brougham door closed sharply, the impatient horse gave a spring forward that tightened the traces to straining, and then settled down into a steady trot.

The gas-light in the lamp by the gateway flared up with a gurgle, and glinted on bright hair and blue eyes, on the face of Will Pierrepont, attaché-designate to the Embassy at Vienna, grave with a gravity born of the past year's storm and change. Bright as a sail upon a sunlight river had been Will's life for many and many a year ; the last of the record might indeed be labelled *sturm und drang*. But a little while back and he felt himself a light-hearted boy ; now he was a man, with all a man's troubles and anxieties, with all the passion, and pain, and reality of life being pressed home to him day by day and hour by hour.

What a strong yearning was in the look he raised to the purple, star-gemmed sky—what a world of troubled thought in the sigh with which he turned towards the open door !

A hand caught at his sleeve as he entered ; a sobbing voice appealed to him.

" Did he say anything more ? He is so close ; it seems useless to ask him anything."

" There is nothing to say that he has not said," replied Will, taking the clinging hand very tenderly in his own. That it was of the order of hands that irresistibly remind one of a bird's claw did not in the least degree affect the gentleness of his dealing with it. " We can do no more than we are doing—nothing ! Absolute quiet and regular nourishment, and then perhaps the turn of the disease will come."

A sob only answered him, as the hand was drawn from his, and the questioner fled with a rush to some inner chamber.

How gladly would the watchers through that weary night

have muffled the chimes of the church hard by—the chimes that had never seemed to ring so loud before!

When the gale came rushing with soft swirl round the corner, bringing with it the rain that stung and lashed the pane, they got up and went to the window, as though in some fond hope that their troubled faces might calm its sudden, intermittent fury. If a carriage or a cart rolled by, they held their breath until the rattle died away in the distance.

Once a servant dropped some small thing in the kitchen, and so still was the whole house that the noise seemed to ring out like a clarion.

Here and there in the rooms that, like a faded beauty, had lost their charm and glamour, a few flowers, withered and dead, drooped their dejected heads, sadly emblematical of the hopes that were fading, even as those withered and neglected blossoms.

Severe illness in a house always gives that strange air of blight to rooms that have once echoed to the music of laughter and the rhythm of song. Not only is some loved presence absent—some presence that we miss, as we miss the sunshine when the clouds are dark above our heads—but the very air itself seems full of the spirit of waiting, faint and breathless with the suspense that makes our hearts beat low like muffled drums.

A wilder gust of wind, drifting a stinging shower of rain, and Will stole softly up the stairs, and, slippers so that his cautious feet made no sound, listened a moment at the sick-room door.

Nurse and patient were alike still, and, with a feeling of thankfulness and hope gathering about his heart, he crept into the darkened drawing-room, where only a faint gleam from lowered jets made visible a sort of shadowy wraith of the room in which his cousin Kate had taken such a pride. There, on the very couch upon whose extremest edge Miss Libbie had uncomfortably ensconced herself on the first

evening of her arrival in London town, Will, tired-out, weary with watching by day and night, threw himself down, and in a moment, as by a stroke, fell into a dead sleep, deep and dreamless—such a sleep as none but the tired-out watcher knows.

With the first chime of ten of the night from the church hard by his curly head touched the amber-coloured pillow. By the time the last note of the ten rang out he was asleep as soundly as a child cradled in its mother's lap.

An hour later he awoke as suddenly as he had slept, raised himself upon his elbow, pushed back the hair from his brow, gazed in amaze at the shadowy shapes among which he found himself, and then gathered his wandering senses promptly, and sprang to his feet.

There was the sound of a subdued uproar below stairs, the murmur of hushed, yet madly excited voices, and then—how he never exactly knew—Will was at the stair-head—down the stairs—had clasped his arms about his cousin Kate, and was sobbing over her like a woman.

He would not have had the chance to do all this but that the two women, Aunt Libbie and (oh, strange companionship of a common sorrow!)—Miss Cynthia, were huddled together over a long white bundle carried in the arms of the most Irish-looking of Irishwomen, whose mouth and eyes were preternaturally wide open, she being in a speechless state of amaze, or, as she subsequently expressed it, “just afther losing her senses.”

“And no wonder,” she would say, “if you’d seen the way the two of them dragged the darlint about. If I hadn’t held on to him hard and fast they’d have dragged the sowl out of his blessed little body; but I in wid myself to the foiresoide, and the two after me—same as the two whistling devils chased holy St. Mungo—and I let on that I niver saw them at all, at all, but, just put little sonnie’s feet to the fire, and all the ten pink toes of him stretching out so lovely to the warrmth; and if you’d belave me, all in a minute, ~~as soon as~~

the mistress was up the stairs and away, there were them two down on their knees a-kissin' and a-squeezin' of them b'lessed feet, and a-sighin' an' a-cryin' out : 'Look at the eyes of him now, and ain't they the spit o' the father's now ?' an' all under their breaths for fear of wakin' the sick gentleman. 'And what's his name ?' says they ; and 'Little son,' says I. 'Well, and he *is* shmall,' says they. 'Isn't he now, nurse ?' 'Shmall !' says I ; 'would ye look to see a baby of two months' old like a giant in a carryvan ?' 'Shmall !' says I, 'he's counted the finest child born in Green Dales these years back, and it's Friend Faith hersel' would stagger under the heft of him. Shmall ?' says I ! 'Did iver either of you have a baby o' your own that made a finer show at two months and a matter of seven days and a half or so ?' And that silenced the tongues of them, an' made them be off wid themselves, and lave me in pace and quietness wid the blessed one, so it did."

"Kate—oh ! Kate—is it really you, my girl ?" said Will straining his cousin to him, and pushing back the thick brown ripples from her brow, to look at the dear face that he had never thought to see again. "Thank God—thank God !"

It was strange how quiet she was, this Kate of ours who had been lost and was found, had been dead and was alive again. Aunt Cynthia kissed the girl's hands, and bedewed them with her tears. Miss Libbie, white and trembling, seemed to go in mortal fear, yet to be in an ecstasy of smothered joy as she hovered round the outskirts of that centre group, that told of riven hearts once more united, sacred ties that had been ruthlessly torn asunder and were now touching and thrilling each other once again.

Never, perhaps, did a feeling of degradation and unworthiness press more heavily upon a human soul than upon Miss Libbie's in the present hour. She had much to do to prevent herself from cowering away in some shadowed corner, and *hiding* her white, scared face in her shaking hands. Yet

under all her pain and shame, like a little bird singing in a darksome wood, was a quavering note of joy.

Kate was a living, breathing woman—thin and pale, it is true, and with an awful strained stare in her poor wide eyes, yet alive, thank God—alive.

There had been times in Miss Libbie's life during the past two long and awful months when she had been haunted by the thought of that face defiled with the mud of the river-bed, of the brown locks tangled with ooze and drift, of the brown eyes, open and sightless, staring up to high heaven, as though calling upon God for vengeance.

Then had the grand old parable of Cain and Abel, the slayer and the slain, been carried out to the full in the case of poor Miss Libbie, for she had cried in the night season with an exceeding bitter cry, “My punishment is greater than I can bear !”

Was it not, then, joy unspeakable to see Bonnie Kate once more within the sacred precincts of the home from which she had been driven ? Was it not almost more privilege than she was worthy of to unclasp the long black cloak from about her neck, to chafe the chill hands, and hold the tray—Heaven knows how she steadied her poor hand to hold it at all—upon which stood the glass of wine and the dainty cake that Will and Aunt Cynthia coaxed the traveller into taking by sips and bits, talking to her all the time of John, John, John, her husband, her lover, her sweetheart ?

It was strange, indeed, how few questions anyone put to her about herself. Curiosity and wonder alike died before the supreme interest and absorbing anxiety of the hour. They almost forgot to wonder where she had come from—in what corner of the earth she had been hidden from their eyes so long—in the joy that possessed them at the sight of her, the touch of her, the hearing of her.

They did not even say, “What voice called you ? What strange presence warned you that your dear one lay stricken down by the hand of a sore sickness, and that on his parched

and blackened lips was for ever the name, ‘Kate—my Kate—Bonnie Kate?’” Everything was so strange that nothing seemed impossible—nothing beyond belief. Nothing stood in need of explanation, since explanation would have been too stupendous to face.

And Kate herself assisted not a little towards this state of affairs by offering no solution of the mystery that enveloped her—by speaking even of “little son” as if it were a matter of course that everybody knew all about him, and nobody was in the least astonished at him. The calm way in which “little son” himself looked at everybody with great grave eyes, the exact counterpart of John’s own, may also have helped him towards thus quietly taking his place in the family circle as though he had been born to it like other babies, and never sat on Biddie’s lap under the far-off cedar tree while Friend Benjamin played five plaintive notes on his woodland flute.

Kate spoke in a quiet, even voice that was like oil on the waters of excitement and unrest seething about her.

When the principal actor in such a wild drama took things in such a perfectly matter-of-fact manner, of what good for the supers and scene-shifters to tear their passion to tatters?

Perhaps if they had lived with Faith Worthy for two months of long, sweet summer days they would have caught the charm of her quietude and self-discipline ; even as it was, though they knew not whence the reflected spirit came, they felt its power.

“Is there any—hope?” said Kate, turning her eyes on Will, and making him feel that if there had been no hope at all their gaze would have dragged the truth from him in spite of himself.

“Yes,” he said, with his hand on her shoulder, and his eyes looking straight into hers, “there is—hope—thank God!—but——”

“The case needs close watching!”

"Yes, absolute quiet and regular nourishment," said Will, parrot-like repeating the doctor's exact words.

"Is it fever?"

Still those wide-searching eyes were on him; he could not even varnish or overlay the truth.

"Typhoid; and—the turn of the disease is close at hand."

Kate gave a long, shuddering sigh, and a light came momentarily into her heavy eyes.

"I have come, then," she said, "just in time. Now—I will go to him."

Her little black bonnet lay upon the table; she folded her gloves and laid them in it.

Every action was so quiet, so self-restrained, that it would have seemed like sacrilege to have failed to follow her lead.

She bent and kissed "little son."

"You will see that Biddy has everything she wants for him," then with a tiny smile she turned to Aunt Libbie, who was shaking in her shoes. "I am sure you will look well after him for me, Aunt Libbie—after them both," she added hastily, as she saw Biddy's head give a scornful toss; "I shall not be able to leave—my husband—again to-night."

No one dared to gainsay her. No one dare to expostulate or reason with her.

She was gentle, but imperious as a young queen, and they were all absolute in their submission to her.

"We have come a long journey by sea and land—and poor Biddy must be tired. I would not let the cab drive up to the door for fear of disturbing John. What luggage we have the man put just inside the gate. It had better be brought in, so that Biddy can have little son's night things and get him to bed—but *you* will see to all that," she said, again turning to Miss Libbie, who was quite speechless because of a great apple that had apparently stuck in her throat, and would go neither up nor down, the while her face was crumpled up into all manner of impossible contortions in her efforts to emulate Kate's own calmness.

She could do no more than nod her head, twinkle away the tears that blinded her, and rush off to get some milk and hot water to feed the little one, and a cup of tea and some hot buttered toast for the odd woman whom Kate called "Biddy."

There was a relief in these homely services, and she would not let herself flinch from the withering scorn of Biddy's eye, or the toss of the wonderful bonnet that crowned that good woman's head.

The look and the toss seemed to say: "It's all very well to go and fetch milk and water, and talk about tea and toast—but let me catch you interfering with this baby on my lap—*do!*"

Before leaving the room Kate went up to Aunt Cynthia, sitting pale and tearful by the fire, knelt beside her knee, as she had knelt so often as a little child, folded her hands, as night by night she had folded them in prayer in those past happy days, and laid her head a moment on the breast that had been as a mother's to the child that was motherless and fatherless, yet lacked for nothing love could give.

"Forgive me!" she murmured, and the tears that fell upon her face, the arms that clasped her, told how truly hers was the sweet boon she sought.

It was Will who walked by Kate's side as she went up the stairs that her foot had never trod since the night she dropped the scented petals of the rose that told the story of her flight. It was Will's arm upon which her hand rested as she returned by the way that her misguided feet had taken when she fled from love and duty, and cast aside the leading hand of God.

Just at the door of the room where the sick man lay Will held his cousin fast a moment. He hated himself for being so selfish at such a moment, the thirst to know just one little thing was too strong for him. He was selfish, *malgré lui*.

"Kate—was it Melissa who brought you back to us?"

She took no notice of his familiar use of the name ; she had no thought to spare to any such petty detail just then.

She answered him promptly and without even a puzzled look.

"Yes ; I saw her message in the paper, and I knew there could be no other Melissa. God bless Melissa !"

"Amen," said Will, almost in as much of a choking condition as poor Miss Libbie herse'f.

Then Kate went in, whither Will dared not follow.

She had taken off her travelling shoes downstairs, and her soft stocking'd feet made no lightest sound.

The door of the room was unlatched, and a subdued light gleamed within. She pushed the door open gently, looked back an instant with a faint smile and her finger on her lip, and then went in.

Kate was once more in the presence of her husband.

But what a meeting !

The dark locks she had so loved had been shorn close, and were but as a shadow beneath which the dead-white face showed in ghastly relief. The dear eyes, whose gaze she longed yet dreaded to meet, were closed, and the long lashes lay upon the sunken cheek. Through the tawny beard, all unkempt and ragged, she could see his lips—the fond lips whose kisses had been so sweet to her—the lips that had called her such sweet, endearing names. Neither kiss nor love-names would have become them now, for they were dry and blackened, and drawn apart, so that the glistening white teeth showed like a line between them.

She could hear the sick man's breathing, quick, short, panting ; she could see the restless fingers wandering on the sheet ; see the great swollen veins beating in his throat.

Often in the days to come Kate Granger wondered that she could look upon so piteous a sight and live. The strength and power over herself vouchsafed to her was marvellous, and she said to herself, or rather the glowing thought glanced through her mind like the lightning's flash : "Friend Faith is upholding me with her prayers."

From the bedside a nurse, white capped and aproned—a member of that noble sisterhood who bear no medals on their breasts, yet merit as many as the bravest and boldest among our warriors—rose hurriedly, yet noiselessly, to her feet, and met the intruder half-way across the room.

"He must not be disturbed," she said, pointing to the prone figure on the bed, and speaking, not in the blood-curdling whisper of the amateur nurse-tender, but in the low, measured voice that never disturbs or wakes a sick person.

"I shall not disturb him," said Kate; "his life is dearer to me than my own. I am his wife, and I must watch by him to-night. I must watch—you will not mind, I know—alone."

No well-trained nurse ever betrays surprise in a sick-room, come what may, and she who was called Sister Beatrice made no sign that this sort of thing was not just what might be naturally expected as a part of the nightly routine.

"There is a bed in the dressing-room," continued Kate, familiar with every nook and corner of the home she had deserted; "will you lie there and rest awhile? I will call you if there is any need. I was away from home when Mr. Granger was taken ill—far away—and have only just reached London. Tell me what has to be given to him, and the hours, and then—you will understand I want to be alone with him—leave me awhile."

Sister Beatrice gave a few clear and concise directions, quietly lifted a warm quilted dressing-gown from a chair-back, quietly advised Mrs. Granger to take off her dress and substitute that instead, and then, after a look to see if the fire was all right (your well-trained nurse never forgets anything, no matter what the general *bouleversement* of things around her), was about to disappear through the door that led into the dressing-room, when a question from Kate stopped her.

"If he awakes, will he—know me?"

We have said that Sister Beatrice had a nerve-system most systematically disciplined, but there was such a look in the lady's eyes as she put this question, that the nurse had to stifle an inclination to cover her own with her hand to avoid meeting it.

"Will he—know me?" persisted the quiet voice, for Sister Beatrice had been a moment silent.

"He may; to-night is the critical time."

"Or—he may not?"

"Exactly so."

"He may never wake—never regain consciousness again?"

"Just so; this unconsciousness may pass into coma, or he may begin to sweat, breathe easier—signs that the temperature is falling—and may wake conscious."

"Thank you—thank you for all your care of him, and for your candour to me."

"One word," said the nurse, and Kate turned towards her once more. "Those two dear, good ladies downstairs, they come up at intervals—well and good; but when one stands and whispers at the door, it is not good that the other should follow, and then that they should dispute in whispers on the landing for ten minutes. You understand? They are jealous who shall pay him the most attention. The young gentleman is different—he comes in, looks at the bed to see if there is any change, and goes out again; his step is like velvet; you cannot hear him any more than you would a cat."

"Thanks," said Kate, "I understand; no one shall come in to-night."

She walked softly to the door that led on to the landing and closed it firmly with a noiseless hand. Then she watched the nurse pass into the dressing-room, and closed that door too.

Kate was alone with the man she loved, alone with her dear "sweetheart."

But he knew not of her nearness.

As she looked upon him where he lay it seemed to her the

reproduction of that dream so well remembered in its vivid realism. The noble, chiselled outline of the face, the classical fall of the head, the thoughtful brow, and deep-set eyes under the heavily marked brows ; was there a line or a touch that had not been graven on her heart long since ?

Dare she touch the restless hand ever so gently, or must she curb the passion of tenderness within her, as one curbs a riotous steed with bit and bridle ? Must she deny herself all sweetness of contact—she who had starved so long ? Must she sit there by his side as some kindly hireling might ? and, oh God ! might it be that the dear eyes should never unclose to look upon her and know her ? Might it be that her terrible vigil should end only in the bitterness of death, and John Granger go down to the silence of the grave, never knowing that Kate, his erring and repentant wife, had come back to him ?

Could it be that her life should be fated to hold such unspeakable depths of anguish ? And yet, if God so willed to fill her cup of sorrow even to overflowing, whom had she to blame save her wild, undisciplined self, her own wayward, impatient heart, her own wilful disloyalty and unfaithfulness ?

It is possible that the Kate of the olden time might have flung herself, in the passion of her pain, on her knees beside the sick man's bed, and by her sobs and sighing troubled and disturbed the quiet that was the one hope of life for him. But the Kate who had drunk deep of the spirit that reigned at Dromore was bound to take a more selfless course ; had herself more thoroughly in hand ; could look upon things with a calmer eye and a clearer brain.

If Friend Benjamin had seen Kate seated, calm and quiet, by her husband's side, her hands folded on her lap, her eyes, tearless and wistful, watching—watching all through the long night, he would have said : “ She is talking to the stars.”

The highest form of penitence and prayer is not that which beats the breast and tears the hair, but that which, like an erring child, comes in all simplicity and trust to the feet of

God, and not in fear, but in love, yields itself up to the guidance too long forsaken.

More than once during that night of loving service and silent watching did Kate's thoughts wander to the chapel by the sea—to the long, low shore where the kittiwakes called to one another in the distance, and the little waves sobbed upon the sand. She thought of the light that was ever burning, and the voices of the singers floating out across the sea. . . .

“*Lucis Creator optime,
Lucem dierum proferens. . . .*”

Light, light, light—that was what she yearned and craved for now; the dawn of a new day; the dawn of hope, of life, of love!

The wind, as it moaned in sudden gusts round the house, seemed the sighs that were pent in her own bosom; the rain, as it beat upon the pane, seemed as passionate tears shed over her by the pitiful night.

Towards morning she clasped, ever so lightly, one of the restless hands upon the bed, and the burning fingers at last lay still in hers. She trembled from head to foot. It went hard with her that she did not weep.

There was as yet no faintest ray of light; she could only tell the morning was not far away by the chill in the darkened air.

It was as though her very life depended on not letting a muscle of the hand that held John's start or stir. She saw the nurse—conscious by instinct even in her sleep of the sudden cold—come noiselessly out of the dressing-room, make up the fire without a sound, and, after a grave glance at the figure on the bed, go back whence she had come.

The time was being counted now by heart-beats, and the fear lest her strength should fail her was becoming a torture. But she thought of Friend Faith; of the last glimpse she had

had of the steadfast, tender face, as the steamer moved with slow strain and creaking sounds away from the quay at Kings-town, and the blue-green water grew between them ; of the simple gesture that commended her to heaven ; of the last words of sweetest counsel and commendation ; of the calm, confident faith that gave her up to the guidance of God as to that of a loving Father.

And she grew calm again, for there was healing in such thoughts and memories, and never stirred, while the faintest grey of the earliest dawn began to peer through the chinks of the blinds.

Was it fancy, or was the hand she held less burning ? and could it be that the palm was damp—ever so little, but still damp against her own ?

She bent close—close over the face that was now turned slightly towards the window. Yes, she could not be mistaken ! There, just above the temple, where the hair had been shorn so pitilessly close, something glistened.

Was it the blessed dew of healing ? Had God heard her in those silent hours, and was He in His infinite mercy about to give her darling back to her, even from out the very valley of the shadow of death ?

Just as the sun-shaft, more cunning than the rest, a beam dancing with many motes, managed to glide into the quiet room, Kate looked up, to see her husband watching her.

It was well that she had learned the art of self-control to some perfection, for in that supreme moment she needed all her skill.

She sank slowly to her knees, laying her face against his hand.

It is strange how the great amaze of waking from death unto life—of having hovered so near the world of the unseen, and then returned to earth, with all its tender ties and fond affections—dwarfs all capability of surprise in lesser things.

John showed no wonder at the sight of Kate ; he seemed content to lie there looking at her bowed head, and when she took her courage by both hands, and lifted her face again to his, he spoke very feebly, but quite calmly, and as though they had been parted but a day.

“ Is that Kate—my wife ? ”

She only smiles at him by way of answer, and bends to kiss his hand once more.

Words do not come to her easily, and there is no need for them.

When two people have been parted for a very, very long time, it is often quite enough to look at one another, and try to realise that the night of absence is past and gone, and the day of reunion has dawned in its glory and its beauty. There he lay, gaunt and hollow-eyed, like one who has lingered a while on the border-land that lies between life and death, yet her own, given back to her, to her prayers and her longings, her remorse and her love.

The hand that she touches is lank and bloodless, and the bones stand out white and clear, but it trembles with the passion and tenderness that thrill to his heart as he looks and looks—and never looks his fill—at Kate—Bonnie Kate, his own again ! Remembrance struggles through the clouds and mists of weakness. A spasm crosses his face, but she has her arm beneath him in a moment, and has raised his head to the pillow of her breast.

“ You will never leave me again—my wife ? ”

And she, taking a new and more solemn marriage-vow than any she has taken yet, answers with a sob that will not be kept down :

“ Never again—my husband ! ”

CIIAPTER XXVIII.

AFTERMATH.

DURING that happy stage of life called convalescence even the smallest and most ordinary pleasures are the source of intense delight. The little things that at another time would seem as nothing are then part and parcel of the great gift heaven has bestowed upon us—the renewal of strength, as the tide of health within our veins grows a little stronger as each day passes, instead of a little weaker.

I well remember a poor man who was recovering from a desperate illness bursting into tears at the sight and perfume of a few violets I carried to him in a hospital ward. There he had been lying week after week surrounded by those who could not understand a word he said, speaking a language entirely strange to him. What isolation, what long hours of weary thought of absent ones beloved, what hopes and fears, must have been his !

Doubtless the sight of the sweet fresh flowers brought to his mind the beauty of the world that was about to be given back to him.

“ *Oh, schöne Blumen !* ” he said, kissing them as they lay in his wasted hand, and then the tears came, and he turned his face to the wall.

The poor heart was too full. The bitterness of death was passed ; the thankfulness and joy of it all made the chalice of the heart to overflow.

If the sight of the simple wild flowers could so touch the man emerging from the shadow of death into the sunlight of

life, what think you was the sight for which his eyes had wept and wearied—the sight of Kate, his wife—to John Granger, as the days wore on, and each one brought with it a greater portion of health and strength? What was it to lie there watching her lithe form passing to and fro in the shaded room—a precious shadowy visitant resolving itself into reality as her hand lay cool on his brow, or her lips touched his hand? What was it to look at that sweeter blossom than ever grew in hedgerow or meadow-land—“little-son,” with his wee quiet face and soft grave eyes?

For a time of joy, calm and intense, perhaps few mortals ever experienced anything so perfect and complete as did John Granger in those days of weakness that are yet growing strength. A few words of passionate repentance on the one hand, of loving self-reproach on the other—such few words as might be uttered and listened to in a sick chamber—had passed between the husband and wife, and then here a little, and there a little, day by day Kate unfolded the story of her life at Dromore, until John seemed to be quite familiar with the two dove-coloured, white-capped figures of Friend Faith and Friend Prue, and to see Friend Benjamin as distinctly as if he were looking at him through a camera.

When Kate left him to “lie still and rest,” John would lie and ponder on the subject of what he could do “one of these days” to show his deep, unspeakable gratitude to those simple Quaker folk who had cherished and sheltered his darling in her hour of need. How he called down all the blessings of Heaven on their heads; how he wrote and re-wrote letters upon letters to them—always in his imagination, for as yet his would have been a poor, shaky fist to try and guide a pen—which feebly expressed the feelings of his heart, may well be imagined.

How Kate wrote—in reality, not imagination—a few hurried lines to Friend Faith, telling her that God had had mercy upon her, and restored to her the treasure that He had seemed about to take—this, too, may be imagined; together with the

fact that Friend Benjamin, after waiting at the gateless posts every blessed morning since she left, in hopes of a missive from Our Lady, was at last rewarded ; how he carried it to Friend Faith in an ecstasy, laid it in her lap, and then stood by, with his hands meekly folded like a child waiting to be told a story ; how Prue was secretly much taken by the worldly envelope, with its pretty violet-tinted monogram, but forbore to say so ; and how Faith read the little letter aloud, and then went to her own room to "talk to the stars"—all these things, too, may be taken for granted, because they were sure to happen.

When Kate was told of the betrothal of Will and Melissa, it seemed to her just the most natural thing in the world. She wondered she had never thought of it before, and been sure it would happen. They would always be like two sun-beams, she thought, shining on through life side by side ; and even their tearful days—if such days came—would show a rainbow in the cloud.

"Will," she said, with her arm about his shoulders, and her sweet, pale face raised to his, "I can never, never, never love Melissa enough for calling me back with a voice that *would* be listened to. It was strange that I should have seen it, too, wasn't it, dear ? For we never had any newspapers at Dromore, and I never wanted to see one ; I wanted to be quite cut off from all the world on this side the wide sea. You know how I came to see it ?"

"Yes," said Will, touching lovingly the little featherly curls that strayed upon her forehead ; "it was indeed a happy chance."

"Nay," she said, a solemn, far-off look in her great eyes, "it was no chance."

Kate had not lived alongside Friend Faith for nothing. She had learnt well the lesson that was never taught in words, yet daily graven deeper and deeper on the heart, as a *motto is cut on a jewel.*

And with the lesson of trust and love she had also learned

that of thankfulness. It is not too much to say that at this time in her life Kate's thoughts were oftentimes one long "Magnificat." She was lost in wonder at her own good fortune ; the sun of happiness seemed to shine on her too brightly, to shine so much more brightly than she deserved, and the little world about her dealt so gently with her. No one put her to the torture of the question ; rather they took it for granted that she had been away for some wise reason, and had come again because John was ill and needed her. It is quite possible that no one quite thought this, but they "made believe" in the prettiest way imaginable, each one giving the tone to someone else. Biddy was silent as the grave, or rather, as an Irishwoman who covers up what she wants to hide with such a froth of words as forms the completest veil possible, and no one dare ask her any direct questions.

The quick intuitions of her nation did not fail her now.

There was some mystery in "Mrs. Sinclair" being Mrs. Granger, in the long stay at Dromore, in the hubbub of surprise and gladness with which her mistress was received the night of her arrival in England ; but, however things might be, Mrs. Sinclair would have to "give her the tip" before she'd open her mouth at all, at all. So she opened it wide enough on other topics, but kept it close as close on the subject of the past two months' adventures ; indeed, she wore such an extraordinarily unsuspicious and innocent expression if such matters were even ever so remotely touched upon, that the servants of the house were ready to come to the conclusion that she "wasn't quite bright."

In this last view Miss Libbie, at all events, was most ready to coincide, for she was burningly jealous of poor Biddy with regard to "little son," and could not forget that the Irishwoman had blown out the gas the first night of her arrival, and next day had told Miss Cynthia she thought it was very pleasant to hear the English cuckoo singing all day long, which was more trouble than his Irish brother took to be "afther makin' the folk smile wid his music;" the said

cuckoo being a cuckoo clock in the hall of a house just across the road. The incident of the gas might have resulted in the untimely death of "John's son," and was therefore appalling. Penitent as she was, almost heart-broken at times, Aunt Libbie was Aunt Libbie still; and the little one who revived old memories of the time when Humbie was thrown entirely upon her care, because poor Susie lay helpless—the little one who stirred tender thoughts and emotions in her dried-up heart was "John's son," not Kate's—at least, not in the same regal sense.

The same "invincible ignorance" that good Father Delany pleaded for Friend Benjamin as an excuse for his being a heretic, might have pleaded for Biddy in her treatment of English household institutions. She had seen the fanciful light that came up in a little flame and made everything so bright around it, but she had never lived in the house with it before. Once, however, she caught the idea of how it was so managed, she made as good a use of the knowledge as Miss Libbie herself could have done, and turned it out in the presence of that startled female with such a vicious jerk as made her jump almost off her feet.

"It was as good as snapping her fingers in my face, the way she doubted it," said Miss Libbie aggrievedly to Miss Cynthia Pierrepont.

"Biddy, as they call her, is certainly a most eccentric person, though I must say Kate seems to place implicit trust in her, and her devotion to the child is beyond question," said Miss Cynthia, drawing her white shawl gracefully round her shoulders, and taking the attitude that settled the question.

Now, the fact was these two maiden ladies quarrelled over the baby all day long, and were very happy in doing so. Each had her own particular ideas on the way in which an infant should be reared, and these ideas widely differed. It was no uncommon thing for both to expiate at once on the vast superiority of their several notions, each one trying

to talk the other down, while Biddy listened with a glint in her eyes and a gleam of white teeth, cuddling up the baby all the while, and doing exactly as she pleased with it in every particular.

Kate hardly left her husband's room; so when Miss Cynthia came over from Richmond the battle-field was clear for action.

Biddy used to tell her mistress of these encounters, and the two would laugh over them together, for Kate's old spirit was coming back to her, and a week of her own home had put fresh colour into the cheek of which the outline was still less rounded than it ought to be. A week! Could it be only that since she kept that awful vigil of life and death? Only a week since her darling was given back to her from the very brink of the grave? Only a week that she had lived in the light of his smile, and within touch of his dear wasted hand? Joy as well as pain can sometimes play tricks with time, making one golden rapturous day take the semblance of a lifetime, for the feelings of a lifetime are compressed into it.

What an hour, to be for ever marked with a white stone, was that in which John Granger, weak and wan, and wasted, yet with a quiet smile on his face that shone out in his eyes like light, leaning on his wife's shoulder, walked across the room and lay on the couch by the window, where he could see the autumn-tinted trees, and the blue sky that made such a lovely background for their golden hues!

Kate felt as if all the birds in the very bough should begin to carol as if it were springtime, and joy-bells ring from the old church-tower.

Nothing of this sort, however, took place, only John looked very happy, and "little son" was brought in by Biddy, arrayed in his destined christening-robe, as beffited so joyous an occasion, and cooed like a little cushion when his father touched the velvet cheek and the rings of silken hair with loving finger.

"He grows, doesn't he, Biddy?" said John, wondering to himself if every baby looked so much like a little waxen effigy, and had such great, grave-looking eyes.

"Is it grows, your honour?" said Biddy, her chin trembling as she spoke; "why, it's afther bein' a regular mushroom for growin' the child is, the saints watch over him! You can see him grow, sir, as the sayin' goes, and every blessed thing he has will be afther having to be let out, or new ones got for him. I'm afraid to give the darlint to either of them good ladies that are always foightin' over him, lest the heft of him overset them, and that's thru for ye. Did he then grow, the foine broth of a boy, and did he make ould Biddy's arms ache and her back sore wid the carryin' of him, the cratur!"

It is needless to say these last adjurations were addressed to "little son," soon to be dubbed "John Sinclair Granger," and not to the master, whose ghostly appearance greatly overcame Biddy, and caused her to mutter various invocations to the most potent of her saints, once she and her little charge were safe outside the bedroom door.

While Biddy was holding forth on "little son's" perfections, Kate had been looking steadfastly out of the window, seeing the red-tipped sprays of creeper and the sky beyond through a dazzle.

There was a touching side of dear, warm-hearted Biddy's chatter, for Kate knew how frail was the little life that looked at her through her baby's eyes. Still, the time was not yet to speak of that to John.

She pulled a letter from her pocket, and sat down on a low stool by her husband's side.

"See," she said, "here is a letter from Ray—a joint affair, I daresay, between herself and Leah. John, how pleased—how glad I shall be to see those two dear souls again!"

Then, without giving him time to make any comment, she went on glibly, turning the letter about before she opened it:

"I wonder why it has a black seal? Surely nothing has happened to the young man, James Dodd. I feel the deepest interest in James Dodd; I shall be delighted to be introduced to him. John, it will be lovely to go home again—loveliest of all to see your mother's face, and hear her speak in the dear, soft, loving voice"

John gave a sort of cry, and raising himself on his elbow, stared at her with wide and haggard eyes.

"Kate, Kate! do you not know? Has no one told you? Oh, my dear—my dear!"

Then Kate knew what the black seal meant. She made no outcry, but the iron entered into her soul.

She seemed to fall together, till her head rested on her knees, and she shook like one with the palsy.

But in a moment or two she was able to put herself aside for the present. She rose to her feet, and bent over her husband. His pallor, his weakness terrified her. She held a cordial to his lips; she wiped the cold dew from his forehead; she called him by every sweet and endearing name.

All the rest, all the sudden shock and horror of it, she thrust behind her.

"Do not say any more," she said, "my dearest; lie still—quite still, and this faintness will pass."

It did pass, but she would not let him speak. She could not bear words; only in silence could she endure.

So they sat on in the sunshine hand-in-hand, and when John fell into a quiet sleep, she covered him tenderly, looked down at him a moment with unspeakable yearning and love, and stole noiselessly from the room.

To wage what bitter war with her own heart who might say? Of all her waywardness, all her undisciplined rebellion, all her pitiful failure—this was the bitter aftermath.

CHAPTER XXIX.

HER INHERITANCE.

“**L**ORD WHIMPERDALE and myself want you, as soon as Mr. Granger is fit to travel, to come to us at Steadly, and bring my little godson with you. Melissa shall be there to meet you. Melissa is charming as a happy *fiancée*, softened a good deal, but not a whit the less sprightly, and nearly out of her head at the thought of seeing you again.”

Thus Lady Whimperdale, with both Kate’s hands held tenderly in her own, with the beautiful, steadfast eyes Kate so well remembered a little brighter than usual, as if tears were not far off, and saying so much more than the quiet, sympathetic voice, so much that the voice would never say. Like the rest, she willed that the dead past should be left to bury its dead. Lady Whimperdale had wonderfully keen intuitions as to how things had been with young Mrs. Granger, and was earnestly anxious to take her by the hand and smooth away the troubles from her pathway. There are women like that in the world, thank God! women who, holding high position, name, and influence, make use of all three to cover what is best hidden, to clasp the trembling hand, to guide and guard the erring feet. Being powerful, they use their power as an engine of good, to silence the blatant voice of scandal, to stifle innuendo, to make return to the light easy for those, especially of their own sex, who have wandered away among the shadows.

Lady Whimperdale well knew that to receive young Mrs. Granger at Steadly, to treat her there as a loved and honoured

guest, was to silence the braying of tongues, to bridge over for once and for ever the perplexity of the many as to her long and unexplained absence.

"Do you know," she said, looking admiringly at Kate, "I really think your stay with your Irish friends has done you good. Your face is a little thinner than it was, but you look wonderfully bright. I have always heard that it is the softness of the Irish climate that gives the women such beautiful complexions."

"The climate is very lovely," said Kate, her breath coming a little hurriedly, "and they, my friends, were so good to me."

"Still, it was tiresome of my godson to take it into his perverse little head to be born in a strange country, though perhaps it was almost worth while, if only to have found that most delightful nurse of his, Biddy. Really, she is unique; I never heard the names of so many saints in my life as the string of them she invoked on his behalf after the christening—and oh, my dear, her face of woe at having to hand him over to the tender mercies of Miss Cynthia and Miss Libbie, because 'herself couldn't go into the Prothestant church, an' my lady, will ye be afther giving an eye to the darlint, for betwane the pair of 'em they're as like as like to get his dear feet where his head should be—the cratur! I look forward to seeing Biddy at Steadly, I can tell you."

"Yes," said Kate, her lips quivering somewhat as she spoke, "we will come to Steadly, Biddy and all; but not, dear Lady Whimperdale, until we have been to Low Cross; our first visit must be *there*."

"You are right," said her friend, frankly, "but I fear—nay, I know—it will be a time full of trial for you."

"Yes—of bitter, bitter trial; but of trial that I deserve to have to face, and that I must face."

"My dear—my dear!" said the elder woman, with her hand on Kate's shoulder, and somehow the two short sentences said more than another woman's torrent of words could have done.

"It will seem as if a strain of sweet, sweet music had died away, and left a great silence in the old house," said Kate, trembling.

"The music was almost too sweet for earth, was it not? and now, dear friend, though we cannot hear it, we know that it rises higher and sweeter still."

The wonderfully perfect toilet, the dainty trappings of the world of fashion, seemed to fade from Kate's sight as she listened, and in their place came the vision of soft-falling folds the colour of a dove's wing, of a gentle face close clipped by the Quaker cap.

A day or two after Lady Whimperdale's visit, a journey to the riverside house was planned for "little son"—and the rest of the party, of course, but they were mere satellites revolving round that central star.

Mrs. Dulcimer was wildly excited on this occasion, and made Miss Cynthia Pierrepont more nervous than she otherwise would have been.

"Oh, Dulcimer!" said that dear lady, shedding a gentle tear, "if only my dear brother had lived to see this day—to see Miss Catherine's baby walking about in the garden under the dear old trees."

"Hardly that yet, ma'am," corrected Dulcimer, speaking as one might to a child that needed humouring; "we couldn't expect the dear child to walk about much yet awhile of his own self. I conclude that outlandish foreigner who calls herself his nurse will have charge of him? This comes of Miss Catherine going and leaving her own luxuriant home, and never coming back till someone wrote a monotonous letter to say as Mr. John was laid out straight on a sick-bed."

"Dulcimer," said Miss Cynthia with dignity, and the old familiar gesture of the shawl, "I have told you before that no allusion is to be made by anyone to my niece's—ahem!—visit to some friends in Ireland. She had been most tenderly cared for, and as to the devotion of that strange creature they call *Biddy* to that dear child—"

But here the conversation came to an abrupt conclusion by reason of "Dulce" bursting into tears, and requesting to know why she was born to be trampled upon by foreigners, and have heathen papists thrown at her head.

As no one tried to answer this appeal, she rushed off like a whirlwind, and slammed three doors in rapid succession.

However, things passed off better than might have been expected when the actual time arrived, and the "heathen papist" was no more aggressive than a Christian might have been; dear old Dulce herself being, as a matter of fact, too much touched and stirred to the very depths of her loving old heart by the sight of "Miss Catherine's baby" to put frills on or act on the defensive.

What a sight it was to see little Chloe's mad excitement and curiosity at the sight of that baby!

Her eyes came bulging almost out of her head, and filled with tears "just like a Christian's," as Miss Libbie said. Then the little animal, standing erect on her hind legs, made a frantic effort and licked "little son's" nose, which proceeding "little son" showed the strongest disapproval of. By this time the puppies had grown into sturdy fellows, much given to ill-treating their fussy little mother, but on this occasion Chloe got the mastery over them, shuffled her body sideways in between them and the queer object on Biddy's knee, and barked like a little fiend if they offered to approach.

These droll, commonplace events are often a great relief in times of any tension of feeling, and it may well be said that Chloe was worth her weight in gold on this particular occasion.

"Look how Chloe is smiling with her tail!" said Will, as the little dog ambled about, delighted to be taken so much notice of.

"Chloe always had a speaking tail, you know, hadn't she?" said Miss Cynthia, with her head on one side, gazing rapturously at her favourite, while Biddy, throwing aside a certain

awe inspired by Mrs. Dulcimer's rustling silk gown and majestic cap, appealed to her mistress to know if the little dog "didn't for all the world call to mind now that spaldeen of a Yap an' the droll ways of him?"

At this everyone tried not to look uncomfortable, and failed signally, while Dulce tossed her head at the strange woman's gibberish till her cap-strings made quite a little whirlwind.

Before the hour of return came round Kate managed to possess herself quietly of little son, carried him upstairs to her Uncle Anthony's room, and closed the door.

We will not open it.

Let the thoughts of an erring but repentant woman in the place made sacred as a holy fane by the memory of the sainted dead ; let the prayers of a mother for her child, offered up where, as a child herself, she had learnt to say "Our Father," and first listened to the story of a Saviour's life and love ; let such thoughts and such prayers be sacred ; let us not cross the threshold of the chamber, whence they rise like incense from the troubled heart, ascending even to the highest heaven.

What shall we say of the journey north—of the visit to the old home ?

Shall we tell how Miss Libbie grew more and more pinched and withered-up looking as Wiffle, that centre of fashion, was neared, so that at last Kate, realising what a scared and trembling woman sat by her side, felt constrained to search out the hard hand, and hold it in her own all the rest of the way ?

There can be no doubt that Miss Libbie would have given half, or perhaps the whole, of her earthly possessions to have felt the train going in the opposite direction, away from Brother, instead of headlong into his arms.

However, arrived at Wiffle, immediate apprehensions proved groundless. The open gateway of the little station gave a

glimpse of the brickdust-coloured pony, his wild and impulsive disposition with difficulty restrained by the wizened boy, whose legs were set wide apart to give him a stronger basis, while both hands grasped the reins, and on the platform was a fluttering, flitting form—Melissa, in dainty, delicately-tinted garments, with no eyes for anyone or anything save Kate, her dear Bonnie Kate, the friend who had been lost and was found, the one whom her own voice had called forth from the shadowy distance into which she had faded.

Jack's cold nose shoved into Kate's hand, the swirl of his great tail from side to side ; Humbie's wistful, yet happy face, as he grasped his brother's hand, and gazed at the thin and altered features that yet bore the impress of a joy unspeakable, and of the shining of a light within—these things seemed to gather warm about Kate's heart, and draw her towards the old homestead, empty and desolate as one holy place there must be.

And "little son" was such an immense attraction and excitement when the whole party reached the farm—the brick-dust-coloured one doing the distance in less time than the keen mare, to Matthew Goldstraw's extreme disgust—that Miss Libbie's reappearance on the scene passed by almost unnoticed, and a hearty "Hey, Libbie lass—hast thou come among us agen ?" from the farmer was all the greeting that passed between her and Brother.

The twins were in a sort of subdued ecstasy, and James Dodd coming in late in the evening, looked scared out of his life when he was presented to "Mrs. John"; grew palely thoughtful when Ray and Leah told him he should "see the darling baby" on Sunday—perhaps the prospect dazzled him—and wished Miss Sweetapple had stayed in the bosom of her family, and not remained to spend the evening at the farm. James Dodd had, indeed, a holy horror of Melissa, and told Ray in confidence that he always felt as if a wasp was buzzing about the room when she was present.

It may be mentioned that during the course of this

memorable evening that ill-conditioned individual, Pilcher, put his evil countenance into the house-place through the door that stood ajar, caught sight of Miss Libbie, curled up his nose, turned tail, and betook himself to the door-mat in the passage, where he sat down with a flump and a sigh after turning round three times.

"I'm glad to see that dog's got more politeness about him than he used to have," said Miss Libbie grimly to Ray, who blushed up to the roots of her hair, while Humbie had to turn aside to hide a smile that somewhat partook of the nature of a grin.

Late that night, at an hour when rest and silence were wont to reign over the farm, voices might have been heard in the kitchen, which, it may be remembered, lay beyond the house-place. Here was the worthy farmer wont to smoke the pipe of peace, after his family had retired for the night ; but this night, though the pipe was there, the peace was not.

"I've bin a wicked, good-for-nothing old woman. I drove Kate away from her home by my hard words, and my lies, and my mischief-makin' ; I'm only fit to be put out into the street, and set to beg my bread from door to door, and I can't settle down an' take no rest, brother, till I've lifted the burden off my heart, and asked you to forgive me for the sake of the days gone by when I tended you and your little ones."

Thus Aunt Libbie, with many strangling sobs ; then the gruff voice of the farmer interrupted her :

"Get oop, Libbie lass, and gi' me no more o' thy foolin'. If t' past's bad, mend it, lass—mend it for the time to come. I bear thee no ill-will, nor Kate don't either, I'll go bail, for ony mortal man con see thou'st fretted a deal, and paid the price for thy wrong-doin'. Thou wert always a skinny 'un, but I'm danged if thou aren't nowt bo' skin and boanes now-a-days. Set thysel' to peck a bit, an' put a better face on things, and a curb as well as a bridle on that there blessed tongue o' thine from this time on."

"Then to think," went on Miss Libbie, still snivelling, "that poor dear Susie should die, and me not anigh her."

"Never fret thysel' about Susie," answered the farmer, a deep quaver in his voice that told of a tender spot touched ; "hoo wur weel enoo wi'out yo'. Theer wur no one to worrit Susie, an' hoo had a quiet spell afore hoo left us. Hoo bore thee no ill-will for all thy worrittin's, an' 'Gie my love to Libbie,' says she, bo' I reckon hoo wur mighty thankful for them peaceful days as God Almighty giv' hoo at the last."

To be told that Heaven's high clemency must be thanked for your absence cannot be a pleasant hearing, and, to judge by the incoherent sounds made by Miss Libbie as she sped through the house-place and up to the room with the uncanny little cupboard in the wall, she felt the full force of the sting and the reproach. As for the farmer, he went on calmly smoking his pipe, and finally went off to bed whistling "Garryowen."

It may seem to some that Thomas Granger was ungenerous to his sister in the day of her humiliation, but perchance his heart was softer than his words ; assuredly he never in the future "brought it up" to Miss Libbie that her sojourn in London town had been a dire failure, and the indirect cause of events that might have culminated in a great tragedy.

Once more Kate lingered in the old churchyard with Humbie by her side. Once more Jack watched the pair with his golden-brown eyes, carefully refraining from a glance at the sheep that nibbled the short grass here and there lest he should be tempted to try a scamper after them over the tomb-stones.

It was a glorious autumn day, and below the hill the golden-tinted landscape of meadow and wold lay like an outspread picture.

There had been a village wedding that morning, and at intervals the three bell-voices still dropped into the valley below.

Neither sunlit wold nor smiling meadow did Kate turn her gaze upon, much as we know she loved every aspect of God's great book—the Book of Nature.

She stood by the gaunt, ugly tomb of the Grangers, beneath whose gruesome stone the sods looked freshly turned, and from whose moss-grown face some words freshly cut smote the eye :

“Also Susan, dearly-loved wife of Thomas Granger, of the Farm.”

How simple a record to close the story of that beautiful, tender life !

Kate’s hands fell loosely clasped before her ; the veil of her hat was thrown back, and the tears dropped fast and free adown her cheeks.

If she could only have spoken a word or two in the ear that was now deaf to all earth’s voices—if only John’s mother could have known—if only she had not died believing the son she loved so cruelly deserted ! How bitterly from Kate’s chastened heart rang out the cry :

“Oh, mother, mother, who loved him so dear, do you know that it is well with him now ?”

Humbie, looking carefully away from the troubled face with its wet tears falling, spoke quietly and lovingly of the mother they had lost.

“She would never let anyone say a word against you ; she used to speak of your love and gentleness to her, and had your picture placed where she could always see it. She told me, more than once, of—of the night before you went away. She could not be angry with you, Kate—not even for John’s sake ; she was always certain that there was something no one knew ; something beyond what she knew herself—the false step my brother took in the beginning ; the wrong he did you, Kate——”

“Because he loved me so dear,” put in Kate—“because he loved me so dear.”

“Yes ; those were the words she gave you to comfort you, were they not, dear ? Oh, Kate, she was the sweetest, dearest, whitest soul ; I often think she reached her heaven while yet *on earth*, and had but a very little step to go when she left us.”

The sun was sinking behind the distant wolds, flooding them with rose and purple, as they came slowly down the hill from their vigil by the bed of the quiet sleeper.

Kate's life was now one full of the promise of a well-assured happiness. Her husband was by her side, her own, in a deeper, truer sense than he had ever been before, for they understood one another better, and suffering had been blessed to both of them ; she had her "little son" ; she was rich in friends ; she had learnt her woman's lesson that to love fully, truly, faithfully, she must be ready to forgive, even as she might hope to be forgiven ; that she must give herself entirely, unreservedly, grudging nothing—not even pain—so love be but perfected ; she had learnt her woman's lesson, and in the time to come all would be well, but for her wrongdoing, for her back-slidings, and her sorry failures, she had to pay even to the uttermost farthing.

We must not leave the reader under the impression that Kate forgot her good friends at Dromore.

What had been her last words to poor Friend Benjamin ?

"I will come again ; keep watch for me till I come again."

And he, day after day and night after night, used to say to Faith and Prue :

"Our Lady will come again."

It was a quaint conceit enough how the two Quakeresses fell into the way of speaking of Mrs. Sinclair as Our Lady too. They were divinely unconscious of an incongruity that would have made Father Delany's hair stand on end all round his tonsure, like reeds round a pool, if he had heard it ; and Kate remained Our Lady to the end of the chapter.

It may be imagined what close watch Friend Benjamin kept for the coming of his Lady ; and how happily this never-ending vigil put an end to the wanderings of the old days.

For his was an active not a passive vigil. He had so many things to do !

To practise the flute, so that "little son" might be charmed with his performance, and coo, and crow his approbation ; to keep the moss and the lichens from growing on the seat under the cedar-tree ; to go down to the shore of an evening and listen to the singing at the little chapel ; to go anywhere and everywhere that he and Our Lady had visited together (always with Yap at his heels), in order that he should be sure all the various places were in proper order for the time when she should come again, and to answer the carrier's questions as to how Biddy was getting on, and when she might likely be looked for home again. To all these duties add an entire Noah's Ark of new animals to be cut out in readiness for "little son" ; and it will be seen that Friend Benjamin's time had no empty corners.

And be sure that great day that the simple soul looked forward to so eagerly came at last. Once more Our Lady wandered in the old-fashioned garden, and talked with Friend Faith in the quiet eventide. Prue wore the dove-coloured poplin, and coquettled in a perfectly demure and Quakerlike manner with John.

For Kate did not go to Dromore alone, and John Granger set himself so earnestly to look into the worldly affairs of the gentle sisters that brighter days—days of freedom from care, days undimmed by poverty—came to the little household at Dromore in the future.

It may also be mentioned that Friend Prue paid a visit to the house at Kensington, and that the old fire-eating General, coming gallantly to the fore again, vowed that he had found a new Phyllis at the end of a Quaker bonnet, and that "Phyllis was his only joy" ; little worldlinesses on his part that shocked Miss Prue not a little, but made her smile, nevertheless.

Biddy did not return to England with Mr. and Mrs. Granger after their visit to Dromore.

The fact was the carrier would not let her.

But she so wept and wailed over parting with "little son" that the said carrier was nigh at his wits' end, and burnt seven

candles before the side altar in the little chapel for Biddy to be consoled, which she never was entirely, by the way, until she had a "little son" of her own, and even then called her many saints to witness that he was not half the "heft" of the baby born at Dromore in the quiet hush of the early summer morning.

As the years passed on, and other children gathered about Kate's knee, she still cherished a peculiar tender fondness for her eldest born, John Sinclair Granger.

He grew slowly and was never quite like other boys, shrinking from rough play, and loving to pore over books of fairy-tales, and to talk to his mother of the stars, and who lived in them, and if they were as bright when you got to them as they were when you looked up at them in the sky.

He was a strange, old-fashioned, dreamy child, sensitive and tender-heated to a fault.

"Mother," he said one day, "why do you look at me sometimes as if you were so sad and sorry; and why do you always call me 'little son'?"

"You will always be 'little son' to me," she said, holding him close and fast, and looking deep into his beautiful grave eyes; "even if—even when—you grow to be a man; because I called you 'little son' when first God gave you to me; and in those days I was very sad and sorry, and you were my only comfort."

Then he put his two arms about her neck, and kissed her many times.

"I am so glad God gave me to you to comfort you. Mother, will you call me 'little comfort' as well as 'little son' sometimes?" said the child.

And Kate promised, and from that time, when the two were alone together, which was very often, she called him "little comfort."

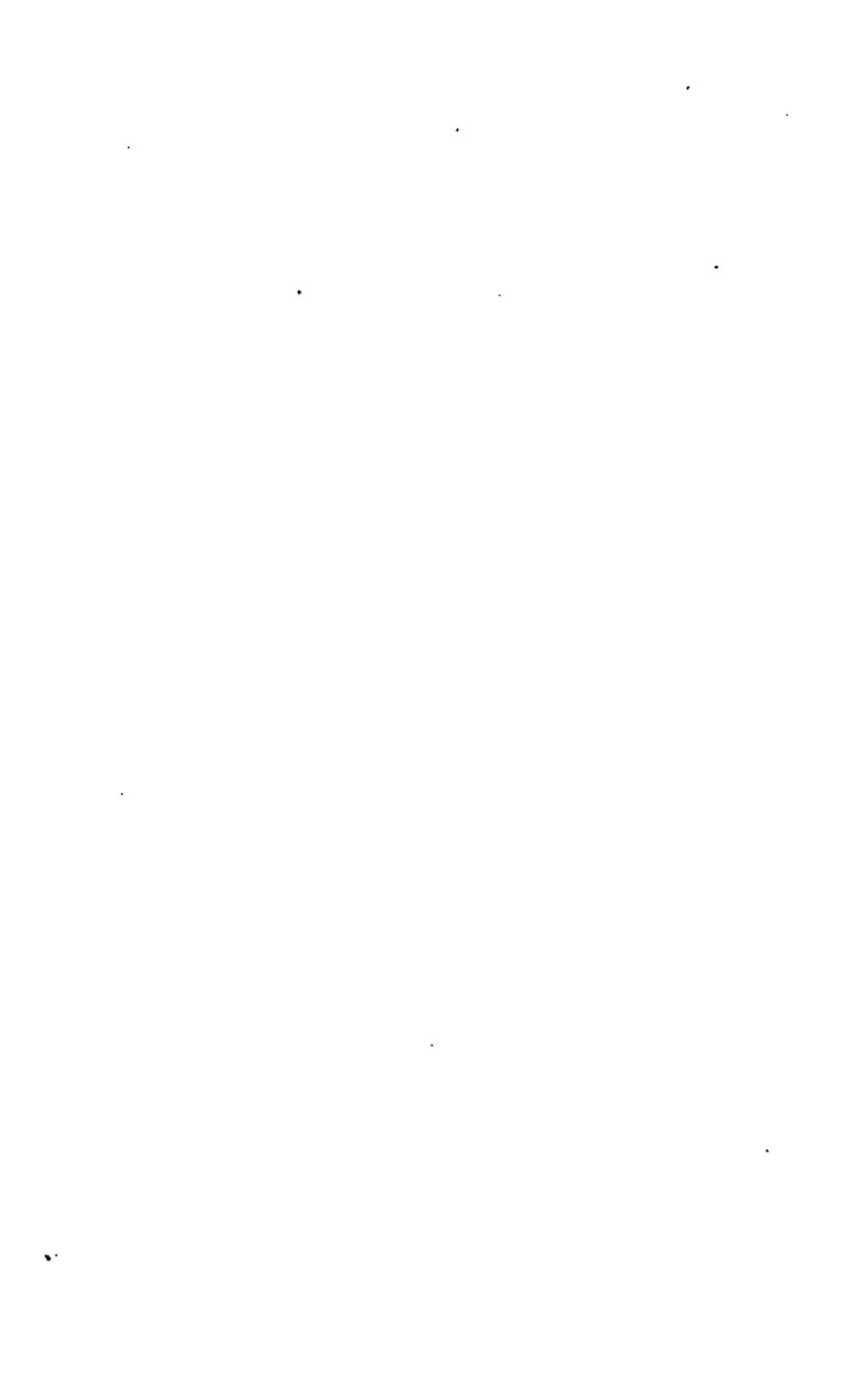
All this while Melissa was living in foreign lands with her attaché, and it made Kate toss her head with some show of

indignation to know there was a little Melissa "with blue eyes like Will."

"She won't know how to manage it in the least," said Kate. "Just fancy that feather-head Melissa with a baby!"

THE END.





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